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Title: Forging the Sword

Summary: Year 2 Divergence. What does it take, to reshape a child? And if reshaped, what then is formed? Down in the Chamber, a choice is made. [Harry's Gryffindor traits were always so much scarier than other peoples'.]

Status: WIP.

Pairing: None. (They're twelve, people.)

Rating: PG-13

Disclaimer: Harry Potter isn't mine.

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Notes:

The impetuous for this story came from two sources, but the first one was this:

I was browsing the various threads over at the Dark Lord Potter forums, and they summed up everything I despised about book five and six. To quote, (well, aside from some creative editing to delete several expletives [PG-13!] and fix some spelling), the general consensus was that:

"When Voldemort was 16 he was becoming immortal, when his [Harry's] dad was 15 he could already do silent spells, when Snivellus was 16 he was inventing spells and creating new ways of making potions, when Draco bloody Malfoy is 16, not only can he do occulemency, but he made up a plan that lead to the death of one of the most powerful wizards in the world. Heck, even Peter was an animagus when he was what, 15, 16. What the hell is Harry doing?

That's the crux of the matter, isn't it. All this time Harry hasn't tried to better himself, yet he has all these examples of wizards beginning to show greatness at the same age as he. Dumbledore can be added to the list above, remember the O.W.L. examiner said that she saw

Dumbledore do things with a wand in his exam that she had never seen before? Harry seems unmotivated and unwilling to work, or even to try to gain anything - power, greatness, or just vengeance on his parent's murderer."

So what would it take, what trauma would he have to undergo, that would push him into fulfilling his potential?

From an attempt at answering this comes:

Forging the Sword

Chapter One: Shatter

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He looked into Harry's face. "But it makes no difference. In fact, I prefer it this way. Just you and me, Harry Potter... you and me...

He raised the wand.

Then, in a rush of wings, Fawkes soared back overhead and something fell into Harry's lap – the diary.

For a split second, both Harry and Riddle, wand still in hand, stared at it. Then, without thinking, without considering, as though he had meant to do it all along, Harry seized the basilisk fang on the floor next to him.\*

Harry had started to stab down into the diary when Riddle yelled, "Wait!"

He wasn't sure what made him hesitate, what nuance of tone in the memory's voice made him pause, fang still held threateningly at ready only centimetres from the diary's surface. Cautiously, he asked, "Why?"

Riddle's voice was completely serious, "Because if you kill me, you kill poor little Ginny as well."

He went still as he glanced from Ginny's motionless body to Riddle's triumphant smirk. "No..."

But God, what if it were true?

"You're lying," and his voice was edged, hard in a way he'd never realized his voice could be, "That'd be the Slytherin thing to do, wouldn't it? And you're so proud of your Slytherin blood."

"Yes, Harry. It would." The apparition's face was calm, "And I would gladly lie at any time to save my life. But in this case," and its voice turned terribly, terribly cruel, "I don't have to."

Riddle took a step forward, and this time Harry could hear its soft footfall as it hit the stone floor. Realising that, he looked sharply at apparition, stomach beginning to knot. When he'd first entered the chamber Riddle had seemed somewhat insubstantial, for all that he could hold material objects. But with each minute that passed, Riddle became more solid, more real, as if he moved from another world into this one. Even as he watched, Tom's edges began to sharpen.

The process had to be almost complete.

Then following that thought: When it was done, Ginny would be dead.

What should he do?

Movement snagged his attention as Riddle took another small, sliding step forward. "But speaking of houses, Harry, let's talk about you. How Gryffindor would it be, to kill your best friend's little sister? How noble, to murder an unconscious eleven-year-old girl?"

"No," he snarled back, furious, "That's your specialty." But his attention was focused not on his enemy but on Ginny, and his thoughts were frantic.

He didn't know how to break the charm or bond or whatever it was that was between the two of them. Even if he did, his wand - damn himself for dropping it - was currently in his enemy's possession. He doubted he could wrestle it free without being cursed, unless Riddle's implied threat by holding it was a bluff? But if it was, would he still be able to get it away from the older, taller boy? Would his own curses even affect a magical memory? Would he have to cast it on the diary? And what if that didn't incapacitate Riddle, or what if it did, but the link still remained open and drained Ginny's life away?

It would take at least fifteen minutes for him to get out of the chamber, find someone in charge, convince them to follow him, and get back down here. That left aside problems like having no clue how to get away from Riddle, whether the passageway could be easily cleared, or how to get back up the pipe. No adults knew where they were, nor was there anyone who could be sent for aid - damn Lockhart's useless, treacherous hide – so no help was coming.

No help was coming.

Ginny was going to die.

For one moment, everything in him seized up, rebelling. Refusing. Flat out denying, because bloody hell, little girls with red hair and shy smiles didn't do things like this; didn't die on cold stone floors, a parasite leeching their life away in silence. He wanted to cry. He wanted to fight. He wanted things to be different, damn it, because he didn't know what to do, and a clock was ticking down, and he was desperately afraid, and there was no way out.

(ginny was going to die)

He wanted to scream his defiance. He wanted to lunge for his wand. He wanted to be anywhere but there. He wanted Dumbledore. He wanted answers, wanted a savior, wanted Tom Riddle's blood, and there was no one with him to give him any of that.

(ginny was going to die)

And there was nothing he could do.

The thought made him go cold, whispering through his mind. It echoed and twisted and caressed and sliced, sinking to his core. It soothed and pried and hurt and it triggered everything that made him who he was, and everything that he hated. It was noon, hiding in the bushes from a gang of bullies, knowing there was no such thing as safety. It was midnight, curled in a cupboard, desperately hungry and cold. It was Christmas morning, watching a world of bright glitter and colour from the outside; and it was Quirrel last year, shrieking as he burned. It was the knowledge that, in the end, there are no heroes, and there are no saviours, and magic doesn't mean miracles, and maybe never did. It was desperation and despair and knowledge, and his grief turned into something colder, his rage to something brighter, something harsher, and in that arctic fire came a familiar resolve.

(because ginny was going to die)

(and there was nothing he could do)

There was nothing warm about it, nothing excited or righteous or adventurous. It was only the silent, bedrock certainty of this must be done and if none else will, I must do it.

It was traces of this cold resolve that, last year, had pushed him into his assertion to Ron and Hermione that he would attempt to stop Voldemort from stealing the stone and resurrecting. The calm of this

cold that had allowed him to leave one injured, unconscious friend behind amid a field of shattered rubble, and to send another friend back as safeguard if he died, while he stepped through a wall of purple flames alone. And it was this cold he had wrapped around himself, one pre-dawn morning several days later, as he stared at the lake and pondered his first kill.

Above all else, it was that cold. The one he'd known alone on a chill morning, known and confronted and accepted, staring at hands that had set flesh to flame.

Gryffindor, they said, was the house of the brave.

He didn't want to make a decision, not when so much was wrong and so little right. He didn't want – had never wanted – power or responsibility or to be a hero. What was a hero, after all, but someone who had suffered so much greater than any others, but was willing still to stand and suffer more?

He didn't want to do this.

But if he was going to, he had to know.

Riddle had been watching him silently, expressionless save for the triumph in his eyes. Eyes that mirrored in hazel Harry's own. Eyes he now met squarely.

"Promise me," he began softly, asking for an oath he'd read months ago, flowery and wordy and antiquated, but binding by the very things that made a wizard special. "Swear by your life and magic and the ancestor's blood you hold so precious, that you are telling me the truth."

The triumph grew stronger. "By my life and magic and Salazar's blood, I am."

He listened to Riddle's level voice, then nodded. "So be it." He lifted his hand as if to cast the fang away-

- Riddle started to slash the wand down -

-and in a blur of movement, he slammed it straight through the middle of the diary.

Harry's Gryffindor traits were always so much scarier than other people's.

Riddle gave a long, piercing shriek and Harry cast away the diary as it bled ink out across his robes and the floor. His enemy was writhing and twisting, screaming and flailing, and then he was simply gone. Harry paid little attention other than acknowledging the grimly savage satisfaction he felt over Riddle's pain and death. Right now, he was worried about only one thing.

He crawled over to where Ginny lay, reaching out to touch her skin. He was dimly surprised to notice his hand was shaking.

"Ginny?" He asked, hoping for a moan, a squeak, a breath...

Her unmoving silence made him terrified and hurt and nauseous.

"Ginny?" But the whisper was almost defeated.

And still no response came.

He knew muggles checked pulses - a brief flash of hands at wrist or throat on the telly, stolen glimpses as Dudley watched while he did chores - but he didn't have any idea how. But there were other ways to check. Carefully, he held his hand just above her mouth and nose, hoping above anything to feel a faint flutter against his hand.

Nothing.

He didn't realize he was crying until he realized he could no longer clearly see her face. Didn't notice when it started, but couldn't make himself stop. He huddled on his knees by her cold body, and he cried. Above him, Fawkes was singing low, mournful notes of haunting beauty, but the bird did not fly down and cry for her. Not even a Phoenix's tears, then, could heal a life severed so quickly.

He didn't know how long he cried, but eventually, he became aware of Fawkes' song coming to an end. When silence fell he painfully pushed to his feet. Moving slowly, he gathered up his wand and the diary, rolling the hat to stuff them in his pockets. He made his way over to the dead Basilisk's head, not flinching as he passed the bloody sockets, silent testaments to Fawkes' skill and courage. Bracing himself, he reached towards the hilt and dragged the sword free.

He wished he could do something for Ginny right now – it didn't seem right to leave her lying there with the Basilisk's corpse and muck and water, not while he took away the instrument of her murder. But he knew no charm that might carry her, and the thought of dropping her body as a levitation charm failed was sickening. He settled for bowing his head to her, and promising quietly to her spirit – wherever it was now - that he would be back.

Then he turned and, dry eyed and with sword in hand, limped slowly out of the chamber.

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TBC

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\* Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets. Paperback. Pg. 346.



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## Chapter Two: Sharp Edges

God, he was exhausted.

Discovering Hermione's clue, hearing of Ginny's kidnapping, the long hours waiting, the confrontation with Lockhart, the cave in, fighting the Basilisk, Riddle, Ginny.

And Ron.

Telling Ron had hurt. And left him feeling utterly helpless. He'd known his best friend for almost two years now, and he'd never seen him go that white. Not last year when he'd offered himself as a chess piece sacrifice; not even earlier this year facing Aragog.

At least he'd been able to say yes when Ron asked if her killer was dead too.

It was a cold comfort, but it was something solid to hang on to. And Ron desperately needed something solid as his world started to shake.

He'd gotten Ron and Lockhart to the Hospital Wing doors, hoping Hermione might be unpetrified and awake by now. Ron could steady himself with cold comfort, but he hoped she would be able to give him a warmer one. He desperately wished to stay with Ron, but he still had things he needed to do. Fearing Pomfrey might attempt to stop him, might dose him with potions or forbid adults to ask him questions, he'd sent the two of them on alone and turned to do what he had to.

Which brought him here.

He watched the stone gargoyle finish moving aside, and entered the small room below the headmaster's office. Someone of authority would be there who he could talk to. He was only a few steps up

when he heard raised voices and stopped dead. A man whose voice he didn't recognize, Professor McGonagall... and Molly Weasley.

No.

Wasn't there a limit, on how many times a person had to inform someone a family member was dead? And to be forced to tell someone who'd taken him in, who had sheltered and cooked and hugged him...

He'd rather be back fighting the Basilisk.

But she deserved to know. And he was the only one who could tell her.

Closing his eyes he gathered the shreds of his willpower. Repeating his vow - this must be done, and if no one else can, I must do it - he ascended the stairs.

When he got to the top he saw the rest of the people in the room. The male voice he'd been unable to identify was Lucius Malfoy, a cringing Dobby crouching at his boots. Mr. Weasley was there along with Mrs. Weasley, who stood to the side as Professor McGonagall spoke quietly but with some emotion. Dumbledore – Harry had no idea when he'd come back, but he felt a rush of gratitude at his appearance – calmly presided over it all from behind his desk, face set in an unusually grave expression.

Harry's entrance brought silence to the room.

He avoided looking at the Weasleys and simply ignored Malfoy, remembering all too well the venomous confrontation at the beginning of the school year. A brief glance and nod was all he could manage to Professor McGonagall. Mainly, he kept his focus on Dumbledore's face as he limped across the space separating them. The noise made when he dropped the bloodied, ruby encrusted

sword on the desk broke their stasis.

He met Dumbledore's eyes for only a moment, before looking at the ground. "Professor Dumbledore, I need to talk to you. Can you send Mr. Malfoy away?"

"Harry..." the concern in Dumbledore's voice was obvious. "Are you sure?" When Harry nodded without looking up acquiesced. "Lucius, I ask you to give us a moment of privacy, please."

"I think not," And his cold, drawling tones reminded Harry of Draco Malfoy at his most insufferable. "I'm a governor of Hogwarts. Nothing concerning this school could possibly necessitate my absence. From what we can judge from Mr. Potter's appearance, something of moment has occurred. Speak your news, boy."

He glanced in helpless appeal at the headmaster, but Dumbledore made no further protest against his presence. Resigned that this could not be changed, upset that an enemy of theirs would hear this at the same time they did, he turned to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, unsure how to begin. Finally, he just said the only thing he could think of, "I'm sorry... Ginny's dead. Voldemort killed her."

Mrs. Weasley gasped and sank into a chair, eyes disbelieving, silent. Mr. Weasley's lips pressed tight together, almost white and the man swayed slightly as if receiving a blow. He looked on helplessly. "I wish I could have saved her." Then, again: "I'm sorry..."

"Harry," he turned his head at the sound of his name, to look at Dumbledore. "Sit down." A chair appeared near the wall, which Harry hesitantly sank into. "I know it will be difficult for you, but I have to insist you tell me all that has happened."

He began his recital with only a few fits and starts, moving his way from discovering Lockhart packing to heading down to the Chamber to the near obliviation. He briefly recounted his battle with the

Basilisk, ignoring the assessing and somewhat disbelieving glances between himself and the sword. But when he got to Voldemort, he faltered. "So. The Basilisk was dead, and Fawkes had healed me from its poison while Voldemort stood there gloating, but he still had my wand. While he was focused on me, Fawkes retrieved the diary, and he dropped it into my lap. I grabbed the snapped off Basilisk fang and stabbed through it. Voldemort shrieked and writhed for a bit, then disappeared. But the link between him and Ginny meant that when he died, she did too. I-" His voice wavered a bit, and he took a somewhat shaky deep breath before continuing, "I checked on her. She wasn't breathing and she wouldn't respond and she was so cold. Then I got Ron and Lockhart together, Fawkes flew us out of the Chamber, and I got them to the hospital wing. Then I knew I still needed to report what happened, so I came here." Exhausted by his story, he sank back into the chair, waiting.

The first response didn't come from the expected quarter. "Harry," Professor McGonagall started gently, "I know it was an awful experience. But you can't blame yourself for Ginny's death. It's far more likely that Voldemort just drained her to death, rather than that your actions went through him to her."

He closed his eyes, feeling weak and tempted. Tempted to just... agree. It would be so simple to just accept the story she provided. And it would make everything so much easier; it would make his relationship with all the Weasleys so much easier. Leaving him the tragic hero, come to slay the Dragon but too late to save the lady. Not the knight's fault, not when others had caused his delay. Not his fault at all.

For one, brief moment, he teetered on the brink.

Gryffindor.

Then shook his head, looking up. "No," his voice was low, but clearly audible. "I knew. He told me. Trying to make me stop. But," he took a

shuddering breath, "But he was killing her, and she was dying as each second passed and he had my wand. If he was telling the truth, I still knew I couldn't destroy him before he was fully alive. And after he'd killed me, he would have killed Ginny anyway. So if he wasn't lying, then she'd be dead no matter what I did, but if he was... If he was, it was the only way to save her. So. I did it. Part of me still hoped that he was just being a Slytherin, but I did it. " A choked sound, somewhere between a laugh and a sob, escaped. "And the Slytherin was telling the truth after all."

He tried to ignore the look of shock, the touch of disbelief and horror, in Professor McGonagall's eyes. He tried to ignore the horror and hint of betrayal in the Weasleys' eyes as well. More easy to block out, though disturbing in its own way, was the assessing speculation breaking the carefully controlled neutrality Malfoy's gaze had contained so far. As if sensing his need, Fawkes flew to his lap, and he carefully focused his eyes and attention on petting the resplendent plumage, avoiding the rest of the room. From beyond his bent head, he listened as Dumbledore spoke.

"A grave story, Harry, and a tragic one, though through no fault of your own." Harry winced. "What I can't help but wonder, however, is how Miss Weasley had acquired the diary in the first place. When we consider whose diary it was, I fear the answer may be of grave importance. I know you are grieving, Molly, Arthur, but I have to ask if you have any ideas."

The conversation continued haltingly and brokenly, as Mrs. Weasley tried to muffle tears at the thought that their lax vigilance might have been what had allowed harm to come to their daughter. Sensing that attention had shifted from him, he raised his head slightly to observe the room. He, too, wished to know how Ginny had gotten the diary.

Harry had been watching the others as the discussion continued, when Dobby's strange behaviour caught his eye. The house elf

deliberately locked gazes with him, then slid his eyes to his master, then followed this by hitting himself hard on the head. After watching this repeat several times his eyes widened, remembering a past action thought nothing of at the time, which suddenly acquired a horrifying significance. He looked at Mr. Malfoy, then looked back at Dobby. The elf nodded vigorously, then hit himself again.

Anger curled through him, and in some ways it was a welcome relief. He stood, interrupting the discussion and Mr. Weasley's grief filled reply. "Mr. Malfoy knows where she got it, doesn't he?" He stared at the man. The grey eyes flickered briefly, and Harry knew he was right. "You put the diary in Ginny's textbooks while we were buying school supplies at the beginning of the year." And with more feeling, "You killed her."

He was beginning to get well and truly furious. The kind of fury he might have felt toward Riddle, if fear and horror and the need to act had not crushed all beneath it. The kind of fury he would have felt afterwards, if grief had left space for any other emotion. The kind of fury he felt now, with no one to attack him, for they were dead, and no one to save, for she was dead too. He'd slayed the Basilisk, who'd done naught but follow a parseltongue's orders. He'd stabbed Riddle, and felt nothing but satisfaction for his death. But Mr. Malfoy had started this, was responsible for this, and right now he wanted nothing more than to see Malfoy bleed.

When the papers began to shuffle slightly, as if an unseen hand passed over them, he took no note. The faint flicker of light only distantly registered. When Dumbledore's ceramic candy dish cracked clean through, he didn't even twitch. And the gasps as, behind him, the sword he'd killed the Basilisk with rose slowly off the desk and turned to point towards Malfoy, he was completely oblivious to.

"You, he repeated, "killed Ginny."

And the sword shot towards Malfoy as though banished at him.

His lunge to the side came in time to save his skin, but not his cloak.

The man kept his balance, though, and had managed to both unfasten his cloak's throat clasp and draw his wand, so that when he whirled to face Harry it was pointed at him. "No one tries to kill me, Potter." Mr. and Mrs. Weasley both had their wands out, and so did Professor McGonagall, though she appeared to be trying her best to restrain them.

Harry was going for his own when Dumbledore thundered, "Enough!" as a shimmering white curtain appeared between Malfoy, and the Weasleys and him.

Broken from his single-minded fury, Harry blinked then shifted his gaze to see the sword still pinning Malfoy's cloak, embedded halfway into the stone wall where Malfoy had been standing.

That had to have been him.

But how?

Somehow, shrinking a sweater or turning his teacher's hair blue just didn't seem to be on this magnitude. Although vanishing the glass at the zoo just might have been something close.

Too bad it didn't seem to work on living things.

Then he thought about the likelihood that he would have vanished Dudley by now, and was forced to revise.

"Dumbledore," Malfoy looked somewhat ruffled, but his tone held vindictive pleasure, "That boy attacked a governor of Hogwarts! I demand he be expelled at once."



The bottom of his stomach dropped out. No. But he could well imagine how his primary school principal would have reacted if he'd tried to kill an associated adult in the school. Panicked, he looked at Dumbledore.

But Dumbledore seemed not in the least concerned.

"Come now, Lucius, I understand why you're upset, but we've never held the mishaps of accidental magic against the children who perform them. It's not fair to punish a young witch or wizard for something they have no control over."

"A mishap? Harry Potter tried to kill me!"

"Mmmm." The headmaster's hum of acknowledgement somehow seemed to convey an air of marvellous serenity, "But he used no wand, as we can attest. And I'm sure Harry didn't levitate the sword on purpose, did you my boy?"

He glared at Malfoy, "Not knowingly..."

Ignoring the dark menace in his student's tone, Dumbledore smiled, "Very good." He clapped his hands together, "In that case, I'm afraid it must be ruled accidental magic. You, being an esteemed governor of our fine institution, know all about the unavoidable difficulties young witches and wizards encounter while struggling to train their magic. Though you may wish to avoid Harry in the future, as his powers seem somewhat volatile around you." Harry had never before realized that the headmaster's slightly absent-minded, grandfatherly calmness could be used as a weapon, but Lucius Malfoy was clearly furious.

"Headmaster, if you'll not expel him for attempted murder, I'm afraid I'm forced to take this to the Ministry. He is clearly a danger to others." Despite his wording, his tone clearly conveyed he felt no sorrow over the matter, "We'll hear what they have to say about the

matter."

Dumbledore's face remained calm, "That's a serious accusation, Lucius, but surely you do not wish to do that. Undoubtedly, a major inquisition would ask why Mr. Potter was so upset that he hurled a sword at you with accidental magic. And his story would have interesting consequences for your public reputation."

Grey eyes narrowed, "You can't prove a thing."

"Unfortunately," (and listening, Harry thought that there was something both dark and terrible in the Haeadmaster's normally grandfatherly tone). "Otherwise the aurors would already be present and this conversation moot. Yet we don't need a conviction to topple your reputation, and any attempt to attack young Harry will have unfortunate consequences for you, not for him. Now, I must ask you to leave." Wisely, from the look on Mr. Weasley's face, he did not drop the shield between Malfoy and the rest of the room. As the man gave a tight nod and turned to leave the office, Dobby scurrying at his heels, Dumbledore spoke one last time, pausing him, "And Lucius, see that no more old school things of Voldemort's end up in the hands of Hogwarts students." He issued no threats, but there was something in his voice, and Harry shivered slightly to hear it.

Malfoy acknowledged the directive with nothing but a curt glare.

The sight of Dobby, however, reminded Harry of the debt he now owed the elf. Without Dobby's help, he might never have learned who was responsible for the diary.

Besides, if it pissed Malfoy off, he was all for it.

Now it just had to work.

"Mr. Malfoy," he called, hoping to detain the man before he left. After the scene they'd just witnessed, he doubted the teachers would allow

him to leave the office to go after the man. He moved to the wall as Malfoy turned to him. Taking a deep breath, he smoothly pulled the sword out, catching the cloak as it fell. Setting the sword down on a chair, he turned, walking towards Malfoy. The silvery shield flickered down in front of him to let him pass, although a glance over his shoulder showed it re-established behind him. "I've something of yours," he said, and shoved the cloak into his nemesis' hands.

In addition to containing the rent from when the sword had sliced through, the heavy cloak had picked up large streaks of blood, ink, and muck from his own clothes, all beginning to dry and exhibit a truly repulsive odour. Malfoy's face curled in disgust, and he tossed the robes to the ground.

"Someday," he snarled into Harry's face, "You'll be alone with me, and no one to save you."

Harry met his gaze. "No one to interfere. Looking forward to it." And at the moment, he was.

A sneer and Malfoy had whirled to leave. Harry held his breath as Dobby's head emerged from under the cloak, but he made no move to follow his master. Noting this, Malfoy's eyes narrowed in displeasure. "Dobby!" he barked.

But the elf shook his head, eyes wide, "Dobby does not have to come. Master dropped his cloak, and Dobby caught it. Dobby is... free."

This was apparently too much, and seeing Harry outside Dumbledore's shield made him too tempting a target. Malfoy went for his wand again. But Dobby bounced forward with a war cry of, "You shall not hurt Harry Potter!" and a bang filled the air as Malfoy was hurled back across the office threshold to hit the wall with a glancing strike, then tumble down the stairs.

Remembering the length of the climb to the headmaster's office, the

grin of thanks Harry gave Dobby was more than a touch feral.

Then he took a deep breath and turned to Dumbledore, "Sir, if it's alright I'd like to go to the hospital wing. You probably still need to tell Percy, George, and Fred about Ginny, but I want to be there for Ron, and I'd like to see if Hermione's been unpetrified."

"Yes, Harry. I think it would be a good idea, and I've no doubt Madame Pomfrey wishes to check you over as well. None of you will have classes tomorrow; you're all excused."

"Thank you, Professor." He slid one last, conflicted, glance towards the Weasleys, then, looking away, left the room. Malfoy was long gone by the time he hit the bottom, and he began his slow walk to the hospital wing. Hermione would have questions and, eventually, so would Ron. Both of his friends had been hurt by Lucius Malfoy's scheme.

He couldn't fully contemplate the results of everything that had happened this eve, it hadn't all settled in. Right now he was mostly just enduring the time between adrenaline spikes, and as the confrontation with Malfoy faded so did his energy. He hadn't absorbed everything yet; nothing felt like it had settled. But he felt like he had made a decision, down in the chamber. One he didn't understand yet, but one he had chosen.

Yes, made a decision, and learned something – about his house, and about himself.

Slytherin, the Hat had almost put him in, and his similarity to Slytherin's heir Riddle himself had commented on. But he was beginning to think that this wasn't because he had "un-Gryffindor" qualities that fit only in Slytherin, but because the two houses – normally pictured as opposites – were in some fundamental ways quite similar.

Ravenclaws in battle, he had no doubt, would coolly plan the sacrifice of distant strangers to achieve an important objective, though that cold logic could collapse in the face of sacrificing family instead. Hufflepuffs would sacrifice no one, though it means they sacrifice an objective in its place.

Only Gryffindors and Slytherins were good at sacrificing those they loved.

But with one friend who had lost weeks to the hospital wing and who could so easily have lost her life instead, with another mourning a dead sister, with himself going into battles he barely survived, and making decisions he should not have to make, he dreaded what they might be called upon to sacrifice next.

And he would do much, to see that it did not happen.

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Chapter End

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Next Chapter:

Dumbledore had said that Voldemort was trying to resurrect when he went to steal the Philosopher's stone. And since Dumbledore had destroyed it – the philosopher's stone: immortality, unlimited wealth, the pinnacle of alchemical achievement – rather than see it fall into Voldemort's hands, that implied that Voldemort could come back.

A prospect that made him go cold.

He'd barely survived a disembodied spirit and the memory of a sixteen-year-old boy. He had few illusions about the outcome of a confrontation with Voldemort in his prime.

## Chapter Three: Gather the Shards

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The hospital wing was dark and quiet when he peeked in.

Carefully, and as silently as he could, he snuck along the beds full of sleeping students. When he found his friends, his throat tightened. Hermione's features were no longer frozen under the force of the dead Basilisk's petrification. Ron was on the bed to her right - no doubt dosed into peaceful sleep – but the faint light illuminated dried tear tracks on his cheeks. Ron was the second oldest of the three of them, but right now he managed to look even younger than Harry.

He shook his head. He couldn't wake them. He thought about staying, but his robes were beginning to smell truly awful and he desperately needed a shower. He could come back when he was more properly dressed. He briefly touched Ron's shoulder, then Hermione's hand, and turned and left the wing.

He made the trip up to Gryffindor tower in a near-zombie state, and it took several minutes of staring blankly at the Fat Lady's portrait before he remembered the password. Only a few people were awake – dimly, he recognized that Professor McGonagall must have said something while fetching Fred, George, and Percy – and no one seemed willing to interrupt him. Silently thanking his head of house, he retrieved fresh clothes from his trunk and headed to the showers.

The showers were private and lockable – something else to be grateful for - and he relaxed for the first time in hours now that he was both safe and alone.

He reached into his pocket to remove his wand and hit a roll of crumpled cloth instead. He pulled the Sorting Hat out, realizing he'd forgotten to return it to the headmaster earlier. "Sorry," he said, gently setting it on the floor, out of the shower or reach of stray spray. "I'll

bring you back to Dumbledore tomorrow." He wasn't sure if the hat could hear him when not on his head, but he figured better safe than sorry.

Beneath the hat was his wand and the diary. The wand he carefully set on the shelf inside the shower, the diary he tossed on the floor, kicking it slightly aside to make room for his robes. Leaving them in a dirty pile, he turned the temperature to hot and slid under the spray.

He had to scrub hard to get fully clean, the ink having started to stain his skin and the dirt remaining stubbornly embedded under his fingernails. The blood and muck in his hair had dried, making it clump in places, and the clear saliva of the Basilisk required scraping to get off his forearm.

It felt like hours before he was completely clean.

Finally, patches of skin slightly reddened from scrubbing, and thoroughly grateful that Hogwarts's showers didn't run out of hot water, he sank down the wall to sit under the spray, resting. It'd been long enough that his bruises from landing on various hard surfaces were beginning to truly show, and his time spent curled kneeling on the cold stone floor of the Chamber had left his muscles stiffened. Massage and heat source at once, he couldn't find it in himself to leave.

Besides, he needed to think.

This was the third time he had been forced to stop Voldemort.

This was the third time lives were sacrificed for that cause.

His parents, when he was a baby. Professor Quirrel, whom he'd never gotten to know unbroken by Voldemort's possession. And now Ginny.

And Voldemort was still out there. Alive.

Would the Dark Lord come after him and his friends again?

Part of him desperately wanted to say no. Voldemort was supposed to be focused on taking over the wizarding world! What type of general in the muggle world would focus all his plots around, say, Eton? It made no bloody sense. Voldemort should be attacking government buildings and aurors, not going after a school child.

That conclusion was smart. It was logical.

And something was telling him that it was completely wrong.

He remembered Voldemort's behaviour last year, his preoccupation with discovering how an infant had been his downfall. Then, earlier this day, Riddle had told him that he'd forced Ginny to write her own farewell specifically to lure Harry down into the Chamber of Secrets.

Voldemort, he was beginning to realize, could not leave proof of a weakness unconquered.

So, what did that mean?

Voldemort would be back for him.

He squeezed his eyes shut, resting his head back against the tile wall, trying hard to keep calm. The implications of that, illustrated in the lives already lost, terrified him.

Dumbledore had said that Voldemort was trying to resurrect when he went to steal the Philosopher's stone. And since Dumbledore had destroyed it – the philosopher's stone: immortality, unlimited wealth, the pinnacle of alchemical achievement – rather than see it fall into Voldemort's hands, that implied that Voldemort could come back.



A prospect that made him go cold.

He'd barely survived a disembodied spirit and the memory of a sixteen-year-old boy, wouldn't have, in fact, if not for the aid he had received. He had few illusions about the outcome of a confrontation with Voldemort in his prime.

Any incarnation of Voldemort might still attack him, but if Voldemort returned fully recovered- God, he would be hunted.

He had to keep Voldemort from coming back.

No.

To truly be safe, he had to get rid of Voldemort once and for all.

Which... he had no chance in hell of doing. Not anytime soon, at least.

So. What did he do if he wanted to protect himself, protect his friends, and kill Lucius Malfoy and Voldemort? What did he need?

Knowledge. He hadn't known enough about the wizarding world to even know enchanted diaries could be dangerous. He hadn't known what could stop them. He hadn't known what spells would work on Riddle's insubstantial image even if he had still held his wand. Which brought him to:

Experience. Right now he didn't even know what he didn't know about fighting and staying alive. But somehow he doubted experienced aurors tossed away their wands.

Plans. He needed to make some plans. Plans on how to get away from a dangerous situation. A plan on how to decide what to learn.

And help. Because he needed protection while he was learning, and

because he'd probably need help learning too. Not that he had to reveal exactly why he wanted the knowledge. If his professors tried to hinder his learning what he needed to save his friends, he wasn't sure what he'd do, but it wouldn't be pretty.

Last, or maybe first, right now he thought what he might need the most was advice. He didn't know what he was weakest with. Didn't know what he was best with. What he really needed to improve on and how he compared to Voldemort when he was younger. He might be able to ask Dumbledore, but he wasn't sure he completely trusted Dumbledore to give him a full answer. What if he pulled the "it's a secret" and "when you're older" idiocy as he had last year?

But who else had known them both?

Shaking his head, he opened his eyes. This was going nowhere, he realized, as he stood to shut off the water. Drying off with a quick charm, he stepped from the shower. When you have only one option, you don't have a choice. Dumbledore was the only one who could tell him of Riddle.

Except, he realized, pausing as he pulled on his shirt, for something else.

Slowly, he walked over to where he'd set the Sorting Hat in safety. Then, taking a breath, he leaned over, picked it up, and put it on.

The small voice was exactly the same. "Back again so soon, Mr. Potter? Really, I haven't spoken to a student as many times as I've spoken with you in centuries, and you're only in second year."

"Er." He said intelligently. Was that a bad thing?

"Merely unusual. Now, you had a question for me. My question for you is if you're going to react like the last two times I've given advice. I don't sort you for my own edification, you know." Then, before Harry

could ask what edification meant, the hat supplied, "Knowledge, instruction, sake."

"Well, I don't-

"Oh, good. I'm sorry for what you were forced to do down in the Chamber, but you've learned from it. If any comfort can be drawn from the events, perhaps that is it."

He was beginning to realize how aggravating an extended conversation with a mind reading entity could be.

"I heard that."

Determinedly refusing to acknowledge that one, he ventured, "So, can you tell me?"

"I can't give away students' secrets, even past students' secrets – Rowena was very insistent on that – and I probably wouldn't even if I could." The hat paused while he absorbed this, then continued, "What I can do is give you a warning. Do you wish to hear it?" There was something almost formal in its tone.

"Yes!"

"Very well. When I first sorted you, I mentioned a great deal of talent, a fine mind, and a thirst to prove yourself. I considered you for both Gryffindor and Slytherin, with Ravenclaw as someplace where you might exist, but would not really suit. Knowledge, cunning, and bravery – all will be necessary to ultimately accomplish what you've decided you must do. But to achieve what you hope to over the next several years, it is Hufflepuff traits you must pursue."

He blinked. What? Hufflepuff? Not that he had anything against them, but they weren't exactly the first house he thought of when he imagined formidable or dangerous opponents.

"Oh, and you think Helga couldn't hold her own against Godric or Salazar? But in some aspects you are right. Hufflepuff does not at all fit your temperament, although you admire their ideals of loyalty. What you must take from your fellow house is their calm determination. You've asked me how to prepare to fight a dark wizard decades older, and there is a great deal of advice I could give. But right now what you need most is hard, steady work. Can you work, every day, to improve? Can you pursue difficult knowledge, not from love of it, nor for its immediate gains, but as a stepping stone for the future? Can you work and work some more, even when progress appears miniscule or fleeting? In short, Mr. Potter, what makes great wizards is not just ambition, or power, or genius, although all those help. It is their willingness to act rather than to react, and to work rather than play."

Harry frowned as he thought it over. It wasn't exactly what he'd hoped for. Part of him, though he resisted admitting it, had been sort of hoping for a rundown of Riddle's talents and weaknesses, or a secret passed down from the founder's time, or another magical weapon, or something. But maybe that was what the hat was talking about, he realized. It was natural to want to take short cuts, but some goals didn't have them. And he was beginning to suspect that learning "Hufflepuff" traits was going to be one of those things that sounded far easier than it was.

The hat chuckled, "Oh, that it is, Mr. Potter, that it is. Now, thank me for giving you Godric's sword, and head to the hospital wing. You need to sleep."

"Oh, thank y- wait. Godric's sword? As in, Godric Gryffindor?"

"Well, he certainly wasn't Godric Slytherin."

He ignored that, still somewhat stunned. Wow. Who would have guessed that was left in a hat's keeping? Albeit a somewhat bossy

hat. (He hastily censored that thought). Which reminded him of its order. "Well, thanks. I mean, I really do mean it. It saved my life."

"Yes, I know." The hat's voice was smug. Harry went to lift it off his head when it spoke one last time. "Speak to me again if you wish."

"Yes, sir." He pulled it off, looking at it as it dangled in his grasp, but it was once again silent and unmoving.

He made the trip back to the hospital wing in contemplative quiet, climbing into the empty bed on the other side of Ron. He was asleep almost before his head touched the pillow.

When Madam Pomfrey bustled in minutes later, alerted once again by her alarms that a new student had arrived in the hospital wing, she almost missed him. Shaking her head in fond dismay, she quietly ran her diagnostics. Dumbledore came by later, as did Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

Through it all, the students slept.

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Hermione woke him.

"Harry," her voice was a low murmur. "Harry, are you awake?"

"Ugh," he answered, slitting one eyelid open and blinking against the light. His eyes still felt gritty, and he could easily go for another couple hours of sleep. He propped himself up on an elbow. "Hermione?"

"Yes, Harry." And there was her familiar tone of exasperation. "I'm sorry, I tried to wait as long as possible, but it's almost seven which means Ron will be waking up soon, and I need to know what happened last night."

He shook his head, kicking his brain into gear and sitting all the way up. "Wait. First, what happened after Ron came to the Hospital wing last night? How is he doing?"

"Not good. I hadn't been awake very long myself when he and Professor Lockhart came in. Harry, he was absolutely white. It was like he was in shock – he just sat there, staring at his hands. He didn't talk or react or anything. Madam Pomfrey eventually gave him a sleeping potion, and I managed to get from her that Ginny died, but she wouldn't really tell me anything! God, Harry, I just sat by him, holding his hand, and I didn't know what to do."

She was near tears, he realised, and with that he also realised how difficult last night must have been on her. Her last memory would have been the reflection of a Basilisk's eyes, and she woke to a grieving friend. "Hermione..." He felt awkward, and utterly unsure of what to do. Should he touch her? Try to comfort her? Or pretend to ignore the tears? "Look. It's great that you're okay. Er, I'm sure your presence did mean a lot to him. So, um, don't- don't feel sad, alright?"

She gave a small, hiccupping laugh, and dashed the tears from her eyes. "Oh, never mind me, what happened? You faced the Basilisk, didn't you."

Wryly, he reflected that she knew him well – that hadn't really been a question. But he nodded and told the highlights of the story again. He also briefly recounted the events in Dumbledore's office afterwards, ending with: "Now I'm not sure how to tell Ron about Lucius Malfoy. I couldn't give him much when I had to tell him Ginny was dead, but I could tell him that Riddle and the Basilisk are both dead. How do I tell him that the man behind it all is currently walking free?"

She stared at him, aghast. "You can't think to keep it from him."

"No! Dammit, that's not what I meant. He deserves to know, and I can

just imagine how I would react if he kept that kind of secret from me. He'd be justified in kicking my ass. It's just- he's hurting right now, and he's dealing with a lot just grieving. I'm not sure how adding fury and helplessness and a desire for revenge will effect him." He sighed and buried his face in his hands, "And Merlin help us if Malfoy – Draco, I mean – makes one crack about his family in general, much less Ginny in particular."

She gasped, "He'd try to kill him."

He looked up, "Might succeed, too. But I can't keep it from him. Merlin, it's a mess. And there's only a week left before summer hols."

"Harry... Are you doing okay? About not being able to save Ginny, I mean?"

He was seconds from making a cutting retort when the genuine concern in her eyes stopped him. Finally, he shrugged, "I'm okay. Not great, but okay. But I never want to feel like that again." Then, vehemently: "I hate feeling helpless."

The silence stretched for several minutes before he asked, "So, do you get some extra time to study for exams?"

As far as changing the subject went, it was a fairly graceless effort. But Hermione picked up on it, sliding into a lengthy disclosure about where she was in revising for all her classes. Grateful for the distraction, and for the normality of it, he listened to her chatter.

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Madam Pomfrey showed up at around 7:15, and she brought breakfast for him and Hermione when she noticed them awake. The rest of the Basilisk's victims she started waking at around 7:30, and after a thorough checkout she sent them off to the great hall to find themselves breakfasts of their own.

Professor McGonagall passed the last one leaving as she entered. "I'm pleased to see you awake, Miss Granger. And you unharmed, Mr. Potter." She gave him a rare smile, then turned to Madame Pomfrey, "Poppy, after Mr. Weasley's woken up, and maybe eaten something, he'll be going home early this term. The house-elves packed his things for him, and we'll be shrinking and flooing his trunk on ahead. Mr. Potter, I'm afraid I have to ask you to come with me."

He started, surprised. "What? No. Please, professor, I want to be here when Ron wakes up." He looked at her, not above pleading, "Hermione doesn't have to leave. What can possibly be more important?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, but they need to ask you to open the Chamber of Secrets. The aurors want to search all of it." Her expression remained stern, but a hint of concern softened her mouth, "And they need to retrieve Miss Weasley's body."

The words were said kindly, but not even the nicest delivery on Earth could have softened that blow. His stomach hurt and he looked away. "Oh." Then he looked back to Hermione. "I hope I'll be back on time, but if I'm not, tell Ron- tell him I wanted to be here, please? And that I'll write to him."

She nodded, "Of course, Harry." She reached out and grasped one of his hands, "It'll be okay. It has to be."

He wasn't sure how to tell her that things wouldn't be the same kind of 'okay' ever again.

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He met the group of aurors at the entrance to the headmaster's office where they were waiting for him. Professor McGonagall introduced him to the ten men and women, (one of whom, it turned out, was



actually not an auror, but an expert from the department for the Disposal of Dangerous Magical Creatures) and only about three of whose names he remembered by the time the introductions were over. Then the professor rested her hand on his shoulder a moment before she murmured her best wishes and vanished up the stairs to Dumbledore's office.

He was left staring at the group of waiting aurors, feeling just slightly abandoned, while most of them watched him passively back, and the remaining few stared.

"Um, this way, then. The entrance is in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, so it's not too far."

The head auror, something Peters, had salt and pepper hair, a commanding presence, and was attempting to be professional. Harry caught the edge of a whisper as Peters said something to the group behind him. Whatever it was, it was enough to jolt the two or three of them that had been staring at him into suitably blank faces. Actually, most of them had seemed pretty impervious to the normal hero-worship he was subjected to.

"So, Mr. Potter, Dumbledore said that there was a Basilisk down in the Chamber before you killed it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think there are others still down there?"

"Mmm," he bit his lip, considering, "I don't think so. I'm pretty sure Riddle – Voldemort – would have called upon them to fight, too. And I think there would have been more shed skins if more of them were about." He peeked into the bathroom, but it seemed empty of Myrtle. "I'm not sure if Basilisks are territorial or not. In here, guys. Er, sir."

It took him a minute to actually locate the exact tap again. Then he

took a deep breath, stared at the scratched snake, and hissed out, "Open."

There were several intakes of breath behind him at the sound of the parseltongue, but he refused to acknowledge them as the sink smoothly sank away in a repeat of last night's events. "Um," he turned to them, "It's pretty dirty down there, so if you have some sort of clothing protection spell for the ride down, you might want to cast it. I'm not sure how much we cleaned it up on our slide down last night." The aurors all drew their wands and cast a spell or two, Peters was even kind enough to cast one on him. "Thanks," he said, then he turned and dropped down into the slide, a muffled shout echoing after him from the entrance.

The trip was as long as he remembered it, and he quickly scrambled out of the way once he hit the bottom. Peters missed him by mere seconds.

"Don't do that." The auror captain said, wand out as he stepped in front of Harry.

"But I thought I was supposed to be your guide down here?"

"Guide? Yes. Scout? No. Let us go first into danger. That's what we're here for, okay?"

He couldn't entirely mask his doubt about that command, but he shrugged and acquiesced. They did know more than he did. He just hoped Peters didn't seriously expect him to turn and run if the aurors found trouble. Especially snake trouble. The ramifications of having a parselmouth around couldn't be that hard to grasp, could they?

By now a third auror was emerging from the chute, so he moved a few feet down the passageway. "There's a rock fall ahead where Lockhart almost brought the ceiling down on our heads. We might need to clear it out a bit; I could get through but I'm not sure you

would fit. There's another parseltongue gate before the actual chamber of secrets, though."

To his considerable relief, they managed to clear the rock fall away without creating another one. Peters held up his hand to pause him when he moved to unlock the inner door.

"Just a minute, Harry. Alright everyone. Mr. Potter is fairly sure there's not another Basilisk waiting for us down there, but before now centuries of wizards would probably have been ready to swear that there wasn't one. You all got briefed on Basilisks before we came over, but it's recap time. Matheson! Dangers?"

One of the younger aurors, who looked like he couldn't be many years out of Hogwarts, straightened. "Fangs, highly venomous, a lethal gaze, spell resistant, large, and fast for its size."

"Excellent. Smith! Weaknesses?"

"Er, enough magic will overwhelm its natural defences and bring it down? Eyes are normally a weak point in creatures with spell-resistant hide but that doesn't work with a Basilisk."

Peters narrowed his eyes, "Anything else?"

Looking like a student suddenly aware he'd left an unanswered question on a pop quiz, Smith looked like he was thinking rapidly, "Oh! Also, the first crow of a cock at dawn, sir. Though... I guess that's useless here."

"Not useless, just not necessarily needed. If we do run into another Basilisk we'll be retreating immediately, then returning bright and early here tomorrow with one. Unfortunately, conjured animals don't work, or it'd be a handy back-up plan. Nor does any cry other than the first one at dawn. You're still thinking inside the box, but acceptable." Then those eyes shifted focus to him, "By the way, Harry,

how exactly did you do it?"

He shrugged, uncomfortable with the attention, "Fawkes blinded it for me, then we played hide and seek for a bit. It found me and I found a sword at about the same time. When it lunged at me with its fangs open, well..." He shrugged again, "I didn't know what to do other than hold on and stab. The sword through the roof of its mouth and into its brain." He ignored the soft 'Bloody hell!' from Matheson. "That pretty much killed it instantly, but, well, I really wouldn't recommend it as a tactic unless you've got more experience with fighting fanged creatures with swords than I did. One of the fangs got my arm. Only Dumbledore's phoenix's tears saved my life."

Peters' eyebrows were raised. "The Headmaster didn't go into details. I'm not sure whether to be impressed by your bravery or appalled by your foolishness."

To that (familiar) observation/accusation, he managed to summon a wry grin, "Yes, well, the hat put me in Gryffindor for a reason, you know. It's expected."

That got a small round of chuckles and the tensions decreased a notch. Peters shook his head again. "Listen up everybody, Mr. Potter opens the chamber and the first team goes in ahead. I want three teams, divide by training exercise triads. I'll be with Smith, Matheson, and Brant, Mr. Potter will be with me. Questions?" At the negative replies he nodded, then looked to Harry. "If you would?"

He once again opened the chamber, although this time all the aurors seemed to be prepared for the sound of his talent. Then, obedient, he stepped back and allowed the first team through.

For the next several minutes he followed Peters like a small, silent shadow, knowing that this – the chance to observe aurors prepared for a combat situation – was part of what he'd realised he needed. The way they moved, how they kept in contact, the pattern of search

they employed – all of it was fascinating. In other circumstances the impressed exclamations when they stumbled across the Basilisk's corpse would have been an ego boost, but his gaze had been inexorably drawn to Ginny's still form. He looked up to see the captain's face, but the man was already speaking, "I see her."

It took twenty minutes for the aurors to satisfactorily explore the side passageways – many which seemed to just loop back into the main chamber. An abandoned potions laboratory was found, as was what one of the aurors tentatively identified as a rituals chamber. A bedroom and a bathroom, too, were searched.

They all rendezvoused back in the great antechamber, and he spoke up loud enough to get the captain's attention. "Sir, the Basilisk was originally hidden in a chamber behind that statue. Do you want me to open it?"

A quick glance around at the assembled aurors' readiness, and the captain gave him a nod.

Harry turned to face the statue, hoping the password and not an actual blood or house connection was needed. Hissing, "Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts four," he mentally rolled his eyes at the size of ego Salazar Slytherin must have had. To make that a private password? But the passageway opened smoothly, and the first team levitated each other up seamlessly and disappeared through its mouth.

The sight gave him the slightest shiver.

Only a minute had passed before a blonde head popped out. "Looks to be all clean, Captain. I think this might have been an experimental snake-breeding workroom."

"Room for more?"

"Sure, Sir. Come on up."

She was right, he observed as he followed the captain up. There was room for all eleven without undue crowding. Harry absorbed the details of the room, fascinated. There were a variety of splintered metal cages flattened against walls or the floor. No way of telling what had happened to their original occupants. One of the large cages was probably where the Basilisk had been kept before it outgrew it. Dusty, surfaces bare, and smelling strongly of snakes, whatever secrets Slytherin had once discovered here, nothing seemed to remain.

It was only after he idly compared the size of the Basilisk now with its size in Slytherin's time (judging by the size of the largest cage), when he realized that the room – although by no means small – must have begun to feel tiny as the centuries passed and the Basilisk grew. There probably wasn't enough room for it to have stretched out fully, and if commanded to stay here to avoid discovery... he shuddered.

He didn't regret slaying the beast in the least, but he could almost pity it. He had far too much experience with being locked in to wish it on anything else, human or otherwise.

One of the aurors brushed by him, and he recognized that he had missed an order somewhere. Following the last two out, he hopped off the statue, feeling himself 'caught' almost immediately in the now familiar feeling of the levitation spell.

When all of the aurors were back down, Peters declared himself satisfied that no threats to student safety remained in the chamber of secrets. He then cast a spell which lifted Ginny's body, and solemnly gestured for Harry to lead the way out.

At the mouth of the chute he paused, but Peters didn't hesitate, carefully scrutinizing the wall besides it. A few careful taps eventually turned the slide into steps, and they began to ascend.

He was not the only one sweating slightly but the time they reached the top.

He took them back to the headmaster's office, said goodbye, and took his leave. He barely turned the corner before he was racing back to the hospital wing. He'd only been gone for about an hour, he thought, but Ron was probably awake by now.

He skidded around the corner, coming to a walk just before he ducked through the hospital wing door. Ron was still there, subdued but awake and fully dressed, talking to Hermione. His entrance caught their attention.

"Ron," he said, breathing a sigh of relief. "I thought they might take you home before they let me go." His friend was no longer a pale, pale white, and life had returned to his eyes, but with life was an awful grief there, too.

"They almost did, but I asked for another five minutes. There was nothing else down in the chamber?"

He shook his head, "Just more muck and dust. We found where we think he'd been breeding experimental serpents, but either none of the others are as long-lived, or the Basilisk ate them all. Ron..." and his voice held everything he had no idea how to say, concern and affection and guilt.

"Time for you to go, Mr. Weasley."

He jumped slightly when words sounded behind him, and when he turned he caught sight of Professor McGonagall waiting a few feet in from the entrance. He turned back to Ron and lowered his voice, "There are things you need to know, but I'm not sure if your parents will tell you." Then, in a normal tone: "I'll write to you over summer; I'll fight my Aunt and Uncle for it if I have too. Take care of yourself,

alright?" He stepped back, clearing the way.

"Thanks, Harry."

Hermione's goodbye was more tearful, but equally brief, then she stepped away as well. Together they watched Ron disappear through the hospital wing door.

Then they looked at each other, and in silent agreement made their way up to Gryffindor tower.

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Chapter End

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Next Chapter:

He'd grown up with all the same stories and rumors about the Boy-Who-Lived that every wizarding child grew up with, but when he'd seen him in Hogwarts the boy had seemed rather... ordinary. He didn't have an instinctive grasp of magic. He didn't excel at his studies. He didn't have alliances with all the houses, or a group of devoted followers. He didn't, in fact, appear at all different from any other ordinary Gryffindor boy.

Ordinary Gryffindor boys had not killed four people by the time they were thirteen.



## Chapter Four: Into the Fire

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The last week of the term was not pleasant.

Professor McGonagall's injunction not to gossip might have held one eve while the situation was still so much in flux, not even her disapprobation, however, could quell the Hogwarts rumour mills for long.

No one was suicidal enough to try to interrogate him, nor had anyone actually said anything specific, but after two years of walking these halls, he knew when he was being gossiped about. Somehow – and he wasn't sure, but he was betting on the other petrification victims – Ginny's death had become common knowledge by the afternoon of Ron's departure. The Daily Prophet headline the next morning was all it took to set rumours aflame.

He sat through the interminable – and inevitable – announcement at dinner that night. Dumbledore kept the public story vague, alluding to 'remnants' of Voldemort that could still cause grief. The Basilisk's existence was announced amid gasps, and his slaying of it also touched on. According to Dumbledore, he had arrived too late to save young Ginny, and the headmaster asked they be sensitive about his feelings. No mention of the diary, or Lucius Malfoy, was made.

While other tables immediately erupted into gossip, his surrounding housemates at least made an effort to be circumspect. Hermione was to his left, shielding and distracting him as best she could. He was grateful, but all too aware of the empty space on his right where Ron would normally be doing the same.

The days after that were an exercise in restraint.

He could only be thankful that the whole 'heir of Slytherin' nonsense seemed to have been dropped. Even Hogwarts's rumours (he thought with a touch of bitterness) seemed to draw the line at believing he'd petrified one of his best friends, and killed the little sister of his other. The prevailing rumour spawned in its place – that it had all been aimed at Harry from the beginning, first to isolate and frame him, later to kill him – was probably inevitable.

At least the pompous little bastard Ernie Macmillan was squirming for 'promoting' an evil plot.

Harry might have accepted Macmillan's apology, but the Hufflepuff had been partially responsible for making his life hell that year. If he learned a little bit of what it was like to be the public target of malicious whispers, it'd probably do him some good.

Meanwhile, the exams started in earnest, and isolated from it all, Harry quietly made plans.

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He'd gone to Hermione first.

"Ordering books, Harry?" She blinked at him with clear surprise from across the table, paused a moment in double checking some of the facts slated to be made into Transfiguration note cards. He wasn't sure exactly why she bothered, since he was positive she had them all memorized anyway by now, but it seemed to be a comfort.

"Yeah," he sent her a smile, "I figured if anybody would know about ordering them by owl, it'd be you."

"Well, sure. I mean, I've got Flourish and Blott's standard catalogue. Four galleons and I get a new issue every month as long as the store's in operation. But, why?"

He gave her a level stare. "Because I want to order some books?"

"Harry! I got that part. Honestly. But what I meant is that, well," she floundered a second before continuing, "You've never been interested in academics before. And now you're ordering extra books for summer reading? What are you planning?"

He shrugged, "I don't know."

She made a sound a bit like a spitting cat, and he had to laugh. "No, I swear I'm telling the truth. He turned serious, "I've lived three years of my life in the wizarding world: one year as an infant with my parents, two years here at Hogwarts. My time at my aunt and uncle's doesn't count – they're about as far from the magic world as you can get and still be on Earth. Three years, Hermione, and I've been attacked three times. I don't think it's going to stop."

She was watching him closely, and he could see her thinking furiously behind brown eyes. "And you want to order a bunch of books on DADA, or, or curses? Harry... tell me you're not planning anything stupid. Practicing magic at home. Running off to kill Lucius Malfoy. You're only twelve - he'd kill you!"

He was shaking his head even as she spoke. "I'm not reckless, Hermione. The only way I'd try that was if I was pretty sure I could kill him. I don't even have a clue where to find him right now. Not that I would have been at all disappointed if he'd been just a little bit slower at dodging last Friday – I'd have been only too pleased if the sword had pinned him to the wall instead of just getting his cloak. But I'm not foolish enough to believe a book on curses and several weeks of practice casting them are enough to take on an adult Death Eater. And can you imagine the reaction when the order came in, if the clerk gossiped and the newspaper got word of it? 'Boy-Who-Lived Buys Books on Dark Arts!' 'Interview at Flourish and Blott's – Harry Potter Going Dark?'" He gave a snort of disgust, and shook his head. "No, I'm not saying I won't be requesting a book or two on DADA, but

mostly I'll be ordering history books."

"History books?" She narrowed her eyes. "Explain."

He let his eyes unfocus as he struggled to put to words a concept he couldn't really explain even to himself. "It's... it's like." He sighed, "Right now, I don't even really know anything about Voldemort, or Dark Lords, or fighting at all, really. I mean, I don't know how Voldemort got followers, or power, or how he conducted his campaigns."

"Is that it? You just want to know how Voldemort fought in the past?"

"No, not quite. It's more like- like I want to know how Dark Lords of the past have usually gained power, and how they're usually defeated. What made some of them win, and what made them easy targets for the ministry? Was it something about the Dark Lord's themselves, the way they were fought? And how were they fought? I'm not talking about dueling, more about..." he struggled to find the words, "About how the conflict is shaped. Armies or raids or spies and back dealing. Why did it end the way it did?" He made a sound of frustration, "I'm not explaining this well."

"No," She shook her head, sounding somewhat... impressed? "No, I get it. You're not talking about dueling tactics; you want to learn strategy."

"Yes! I mean, obviously it isn't enough just to kill leaders, not when it leaves people like Lucius Malfoy walking free. If it gets bad again, I don't want to leave behind any more Death Eaters free to kill my friends or their family."

She was still looking at him like he'd announced he was going to climb Mt. Everest this summer. Dubious, but a little impressed. It was somewhat aggravating.

"What?" he asked, a tad sharper than he'd intended.

"Nothing. It's just. Honestly, Harry, I didn't think you'd be this mature. You don't really like studying, and you're smart enough to know theory's not your strong point like practical magic is. I half expected you to dive into memorizing all sorts of curses and jinxes, and not pay any attention to a larger picture. In the past few days you've grown up a lot, Harry." Her voice turned just a little wistful as she continued, "And you were already one of the most adult twelve-year-olds I know."

He gave a last glance around and sighed. "You know I killed Quirrel last year." She took a deep breath, and looked like she was about to interrupt, so he shook his head. "No, I'm trying to explain things. You deserve to know since I'm asking you for help." She settled back in her seat, obviously willing to wait and listen, so he began again.

"Okay. Like I said, last year I killed Quirrel. I didn't like it – certainly didn't enjoy it! - but it didn't really hurt me. He was practically a Death Eater by then, even if he might not have wanted to be in the beginning. And he was trying to steal the philosopher's stone. We did not need an immortal dark lord with all the power, wealth, and influence a philosopher's stone could bring him. Besides which, he was trying with a certain degree of success to kill me at the time." He glanced at her to see how she was following all this, and at her encouraging expression he took a deep breath and continued. "I never had any nightmares over it. I never hated myself over it. And the only thing I really feared from it – or was wary of, rather – was what all of that said about me."

Here she tried to interject again, but he stopped her, "No. Like I said, I don't hate myself. But I look at Ron, or even you, or at some of the first years wandering around, laughing and playing and talking, and I know that my reaction isn't the same as most of them would have." He shrugged, "It isn't. I don't know why - if it's me, or something from the Killing Curse, or what, but I'm different. I mean, how would you

have reacted? Or Lavender Brown? Dean Thomas? Or, God forbid, Neville? You see?"

Perhaps sensing he didn't want a really long answer, she only nodded.

"Okay." He took a moment and another deep breath, getting ready to say what he had to next. It seemed like he was kept being forced to talk about Ginny, ripping off a scab each time the wound had only just begun to heal. "Down in the chamber, I had to kill Ginny to kill Riddle." He did his best not to acknowledge the look of pity in her eyes, "Yes, she would have died anyway. Yes, there was absolutely nothing I could do to save her. No, it wasn't my fault she received the diary in the first place. But I did do it, and I did it knowingly. Not my fault, but my responsibility. And next time it could be Ron. Or you." He met her eyes, "I think I can endure some hours of extra studying, if it means I don't someday find myself speaking the curse that takes your or Ron's life."

Because that was now his greatest fear. Ginny had proved that he could sacrifice his friends; now he would do whatever it took to see to it that he never had to. He might survive it, he wasn't sure his soul would.

His attention was pulled back when Hermione started silently gathering up her books and supplies. "Hermione?"

She packed in her inkwell and stood, "Come on, it's almost time for lunch. I can go pick up the catalogue from my room after we eat. In the meantime, do you want to know what I know about Voldemort's rise to power?"

He smiled as he slung his book bag over his shoulder and walked after her. "Sure."

"Alright. First, you have to realize that he managed to get fairly far

along before rumours of his existence reached the Ministry of the day. The defeat of the Dark Wizard Grindelwald, and the collapse of his power structure and allies, not only provided a smoke-screen of confusion for years afterwards, but lured the powers of the day into complacency. No one was expecting the rise of a new dark wizard so soon after the defeat of the previous one..."

Listening raptly, Harry followed her out of the library.

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Their voices faded into the distance as they continued to the great hall. Left behind them, a figure hidden in the shadows of the stacks exhaled. He hadn't planned to eavesdrop, although once he'd heard part of the discussion there was no way he could have walked away. Now he had to decide what to do with what he had learned.

Not that he'd overheard anything that could really be considered too much of a secret. The Boy-Who-Lived was studying history? Send a notice to the Prophet! But it was the way he had talked; the reasons for his interest and the way he was approaching it.

Hermione Granger was not the only one who would have expected Harry Potter to head straight to the DADA shelves.

And those soft revelations at the end!

He'd grown up with all the same stories and rumors about the Boy-Who-Lived that every wizarding child grew up with, but when he'd seen him in Hogwarts the boy had seemed rather... ordinary. He didn't have an instinctive grasp of magic. He didn't excel at his studies. He didn't have alliances with all the houses, or a group of devoted followers. He didn't, in fact, appear at all different from any other ordinary Gryffindor boy.

Ordinary Gryffindor boys had not killed four people by the time they

were thirteen.

And (he thought with just a touch of shocked hilarity) Potter still had a few more months to add to that count before his birthday

It would make more sense, he thought dimly, attempting to reconcile what he'd thought he'd known with what he'd just heard, if Potter was a raging psychopath of some sorts. Then he wouldn't be surprised. But Potter really just wasn't. He was always polite. He would defend anyone from being picked on. He never started fights, although he didn't back down from them either. He'd chip in good naturedly in school projects. The parseltongue ability had been rather surprising, but he himself had, in fact, only been rather darkly amused at the whole 'heir of Slytherin' nonsense. Harry Potter was not the type to walk around petrifying other children out of childish spite.

That, at least, he was relieved he had not misjudged on.

He'd gone to some lengths to present himself as quietly apolitical in his house, and he'd consequently managed to avoid most of the power games a contemporary of Draco Malfoy would otherwise be forced to endure. He hadn't paid much attention to the Boy-Who-Lived other than his own casual curiosity, and for the occasional enjoyment derived from watching Malfoy fume helplessly. But if what he'd just heard was any indication, the public knowledge about Harry Potter and his exploits wasn't even half the true story.

He might quietly keep an eye out next year. He wasn't sure exactly why or what he was looking for, but he had a feeling Harry Potter might turn out to be more interesting than he'd expected. Might, in fact, one day become what his grandmother called a pegwyn, a pivot.

And in the meantime?

It sounded like Lucius Malfoy might want to start watching his back.



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Harry's books arrived at breakfast on the last day of term. He picked up the small parcel of shrunken books and tucked it in his bag without opening it. After breakfast he'd see if he could get an older student to cast notice-me-not charms on each of the books, maybe one of the prefects. He did not plan for them to stay locked in his trunk all summer, and hopefully the charms might prevent his aunt and uncle from noticing the presence of magic books in case of an accident. It'd be even easier if he could get a time-released unshrinking spell on them – he'd be able to just pocket them, avoiding the effort of smuggling them up to his room – but as the Ministry apparently couldn't differentiate between his spells and a house elf's, he wouldn't bet they could tell his spells from another student's either.

Thinking of which, he really should see about getting that previous warning cleared.

The train ride was long and uneventful. He'd said his goodbyes to Seamus and Dean in the tower that morning, so they were having fun farther up the train. Neville stopped by to talk for a little bit, but for the most part he and Hermione had been left alone. His uncle's greetings had been as charming and convivial as ever, and the trip back was made in silence. He found an opportunity to slip down and pick the lock on the cupboard while the Dursleys were eating dinner, and stashing his gains was quickly done. Really important things, and things he'd not thought to get charmed – his invisibility cloak, his album, and some extra food – were hidden under the loose floorboard. His school books and the books from Flourish and Blott's - all charmed unnoticeable by a friendly seventh year – were simply shoved out of plain sight under his bed. Since Petunia never cleaned his room, he figured they'd be safe enough from casual glances in the course of snooping.

At any rate, he was easily done in time to look perfectly innocent when his uncle came by to ensure he wasn't doing any "funny" business. Hedwig was padlocked inside her cage over his protests – a state of affairs he was determined to quickly rectify – and gave a quiet, mournful hoot when he gave her an owl treat.

Then he sat down on his bed, pulled out a blank sheet of parchment, ink, and a quill, and began to scheme.

When he'd gone to Dumbledore to return the hat – and to hand over the diary – he'd asked some questions about what he'd managed to do with Gryffindor's sword. Before that, he'd sort of assumed that, once a wizard started training, accidental magic wouldn't happen anymore. This turned out to be an only halfway accurate summation of events.

Once a child entered training accidental magic – magic the witch or wizard didn't mean to do, didn't even realize they were doing, often enough – did stop happening. But, Dumbledore had asked him with a serious gaze, had he truly not meant for Lucius Malfoy to be hurt?

Remembering his overwhelming desire to see the senior Malfoy's blood, he wasn't sure he could honestly say yes.

And that, Dumbledore had explained, was the difference between accidental magic and uncontrolled magic. A subset of wandless magic, uncontrolled magic was just that – magic that happened when, usually due to strong emotions, a wizard or witch lost control over their power.

The headmaster had laughed a little when he immediately burst into a flurry of questions, most of which boiled down to "why use wands?", but he had answered them.

The drawback to uncontrolled magic was that it wasn't strong. No, that wasn't quite how Dumbledore had put it; the problem was that it

wasn't focused. His anger at Lucius Malfoy had flung a sword, but it could have just as easily only shattered windows, or have set his robes on fire, or have shoved the man back several paces. The point was that there was no way he could know. And if he got placed into the same situation a second time, the uncontrolled magic might manifest differently.

All of which meant it really was next to useless in a duel. As strong as it might be, scattered around a wizard or witch without direction it couldn't do the same kind of damage in the way a curse or hex could. A simple shield is all it takes to fend off most attacks from uncontrolled magic. If Malfoy had held his wand close to hand, that was all it would have taken to halt the Gryffindor sword. Finally, it wasn't exactly fast or a surprise attack. It usually took a bit of time to build up, and it could manifest a variety of secondary magical effects as warning signs: flickering lights, a small breeze, tremors as if the wizard or witch stood at the epicentre of a small earthquake...

So it wouldn't be any use it fighting Voldemort or Death Eaters. Fine. But he suspected he might just have another use for it nonetheless.

When he'd inquired – in his absolute best tone of pure idle curiosity – whether Ministry monitoring wards picked up uncontrolled as well as wanded magic, (since they didn't seem to pick up - or at least punish - accidental magic), Dumbledore had paused, pulled down his half-moon spectacles, and looked at him.

He'd looked down, fighting a blush, and made a note to work on his 'pure, idle curiosity' tone.

Somewhat to his astonishment, Dumbledore had told him that it might be picked up if strong enough, but there were no laws against it. A loophole, he'd added, and not a sanction.

Then, making a somewhat cryptic comment about the wisdom of judgement and restraint, he'd handed Harry a lemon drop and sent

him on to his Transfiguration exam.

There were times when he really liked that man.

Which all brought him to tonight, waiting for the Durleys to leave so he could sneak out and see what he could accomplish.

For his plan to work he didn't need his magic to be controlled, or predictable, or powerful, all he needed was to be sure that he could make something abnormal happen at will.

If he could, well, tomorrow would be Sunday, and his uncle would be home. It just might be time to negotiate.

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1:07 AM.

He rolled off the bed, grabbed his wand, and tiptoed out of the house. Then he paused for a moment, thinking.

He didn't want to go too far from the safety of the house. Not that he was really worried about his ability to defend himself from a muggle mugger, but the whole idea behind this affair was to not get himself brought up on improper use of magic charges.

On the other hand, the neighborhood around Privet Drive was undoubtedly one of the safer suburbs, and he was leery of making his first attempt at deliberate uncontrolled magic on his aunt and uncle's front lawn. He really, really, didn't want to wake them if noise occurred, and in plain sight of half a dozen muggle houses, minimum, was probably not the best place to work magic.

The park it was, then.

It was a short walk, no more than ten minutes, and it proved to be

thankfully deserted. He settled down in a small alcove in the bushes. There, shielded from sight on three sides, he tried to figure out how to not only call his magic up, but to let it slip its leash enough to manifest. The opposite, after two years of Hogwarts studies, was second nature. Figuring out exactly how to reverse it would require some fumbling.

Twenty minutes later he tossed away the stone he'd been focusing on in disgust.

That had been splendidly unsuccessful. What was he missing?

One hand twisted strands of grass together as he thought. Hadn't Dumbledore said something about it normally happening in times of strong emotion? He hadn't mandated exactly which emotion, but the only one that had worked for Harry so far appeared to be anger. It was worth a try, anyway.

He snapped off a branch from the bush besides him, and set it on the grass to give him something to focus on. Then, feeling somewhat reluctant, he closed his eyes and summoned images to the fore. Lucius Malfoy's sneering face, Hermione's petrified body, Riddle's taunting voice, the horror of knowing he had no choice, Ginny's death, Ron's pain, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's betrayed looks – he took his anger and he fed it his guilt and his horror and his pain, transforming fear and grief into tongues of fire that licked at his self control. Distantly, he heard the brush around him rustle, as if a gust had come up, but only distantly. Higher and higher he built it, till anger flared to fury. Then he opened his eyes, and focused it all on the twig in front of him.

The wood exploded, splinters flying everywhere.

He flung his hands up as he turned his face away, but he wasn't quite quick enough to shield himself from the flying wooden shrapnel. He felt a sharp sting as a larger piece sliced his cheek as it flew by, and

he hissed in pain as smaller splinters peppered his hands and forearms. After a few seconds of stillness, he slowly brought his hands down, wincing as he looked at himself.

Dumbledore could have mentioned that when he said uncontrolled magic was dangerous, he'd meant to both the target and the caster!

Alternating swearing, wincing, and hissing, he slowly started to pull splinters out. When he was finished there were small beads of blood across his hands and arms, and he was becoming somewhat dubious about the project.

He definitely needed to try this another way.

First, because that had made him feel sick. Creating that much hatred and rage... he shuddered. He wasn't entirely comfortable knowing he could feel like that, and he didn't want to feel it too often. Certainly not when he was only trying to rattle the Dursleys! Besides, it felt like he was using his friends' pain, exploiting it. He could do that if he had to, would do it, but pulling that out for what would be parlour tricks with his wand just felt like he was demeaning both them and himself.

Besides, he reflected wryly, it hadn't accomplished what he wanted anyway.

He wasn't, after all, trying to kill his aunt and uncle. Nor was he trying to break their stuff, (although a small, dark part of him idly wished he could). All that would do is make his uncle more difficult. No, what he was going for was, what had Dumbledore called it? The secondary manifestations of primary magical phenomena. The flickering lights, the sudden breeze – not at all dangerous, but to a family who loathed his kind, positively unnerving.

Rage, it seemed, was more likely to make his magic try to incinerate them.

Usually strong emotion implied not always. Maybe emotion just made it easier? He closed his eyes again and tried to recall exactly what it had felt like, not emotionally, but with his magic. But as much as he sought back to that moment, he couldn't remember anything but the rage. He grimaced, raising a hand to tentatively probe the small cut on his cheek. All of which meant that, if he wasn't giving up on his idea, he'd have to try again.

But this time, definitely without the stick.

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An hour and a quarter later, it was just beyond half past three in the morning when he rose and staggered home.

It had taken him five more tries that night before he'd been able to separate himself from the tempest of his emotions enough to find the comparative whisper of his magic being released. Three more tries after that, closely paying attention to the sensation, before he thought he understood fully what was happening.

And what was happening seemed somewhat paradoxical.

When he unleashed uncontrolled magic it was an act of both pushing and letting go at the same time, much like trying to move an object by hand without touching it.

The difficulty, therefore, was rather obvious.

Part of uncontrolled magic was instinctive – wizards and witches apparently grabbed for their magic when distressed. That's why Neville had bounced instead of getting seriously injured when he was tossed out a window, and was one of the reasons why magical people were far less likely to die in an accident than muggles. Quidditch played by wizards and witches was dangerous, if fun.

Quidditch played by muggles, if they could figure out how, would be fatal.

He remembered reading about it all last year, in one of the earlier chapters of Introduction to Magical Theory, but until now he hadn't really understood what the textbook meant. And strong emotion – as a fairly good indication of significant distress – roused the magic normally held in quiescent discipline by the wizard or witch.

That was the first part of it.

The second part followed naturally. Normally, the wizard only calls magic when about to channel it into a spell. So there you have a furious or terrified wizard, pulling his magic up by the bucket loads, and not paying any attention to it in the least. The magic, meanwhile, is active, and the control that normally moulds it into concentrated energy is gone. So the magic just continued to gather til even vague, unspecified desires could give it form. Or more often, a target.

But before that point, that much magic - charged magic, active with anger or fear - concentrated in one place but with only the vaguest direction, usually had effects on the natural world around it.

Having figured out how it felt, however, actually attempting it without the fury was shelved for another night.

Right now his head was pounding, he felt like throwing up, he was completely emotionally exhausted, and at five hours past the time he normally went to sleep, he was physically exhausted too. He nearly tripped over Dudley's discarded trainers, and a hasty grab at the hall table was all that saved him from a fall. A glass of water from the kitchen tap, and he headed up for bed.

Vaguely, he hoped the Dursley's might be so displeased at having him back that they were simply glad not to be forced to put up with



his presence for breakfast.

Right now he felt like he could sleep for a week.

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His prayers were not answered.

His aunt's persistent rapping at the door at last roused him, and if his eventual "I'm up, Aunt Petunia," sounded less than amiable, at least it wasn't the snarl he'd almost greeted her with. And no wonder, he thought, blearily staring at the alarm clock. Three and a half hours of sleep was far too little to expect anyone to be human.

He checked his arms, but while the various pricks still hurt, none of them were obvious to casual scrutiny. The slice on his cheek was more problematic, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. He ran his hands through his hair, changed his clothes, and, figuring he'd done all he could without a mirror, headed to the kitchen.

Breakfast was made quickly and without complaint, and his uncle's suspicious "What happened to your face, boy?" was easily satisfied by a fabrication about tripping over his shoes last night. Their obvious amusement over this he bore stoically.

His uncle's gruff orders about what he was to do what was expected from him this summer – no freakishness, do whatever chores he was assigned, stay out of their way - actually dovetailed rather nicely with his own plans for studying. After six years of experience, washing and drying the dishes was quick work, as was mowing the lawn and weeding. He finished up at ten, took a fifteen minute shower, and headed back to his bed, setting the alarm to wake him in two hours to make lunch. After the lunch dishes were done his aunt didn't have anything for him to do – his uncle was taking Dudley to the movies, so he got out of washing the car – and he returned upstairs to his room, his afternoon his own. Pulling Insurrection: the history and

tactics of Dark Lords from under his bed, he propped his chin on his hand and started reading.

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And so the weeks passed.

His reading of history continued slowly, and he interspersed it with other subjects. He'd decided to go through his older textbooks, (or older portions of his textbook), making sure he understood everything where before he'd been happy to "get by." Back in primary school he'd pretty much been forced to teach himself math from the book, and he'd noticed that when he had a problem understanding a section, the answer was usually something he hadn't really understood a few sections back. He didn't see any reason why that should be different with magic.

Besides, quizzing himself as he attempted to memorize entries from 1001 Magical Herbs and Fungi - which was used up till NEWT level potions – was a welcome break from the monotony. (Magical theory, despite his newfound resolve, was still not his strong point.) He actually wasn't sure how well his resolution to totally change his study habits would have gone (determination versus a twelve year old's attention span, he admitted to himself, no matter how motivated, was chancy at best) if not for two things. One, he wasn't at Hogwarts. He didn't have any friends here. He didn't have any games here. He didn't have any freedom here. In fact, he didn't have anything here, except for his magic books. Memorizing magical plants might be boring (except, yeah, there was that section about the man-eating ones, and then the part about the acid spitting ones which was, well, kind of cool...) but it was still more interesting than sitting in his room, staring at the walls.

The second thing that kept him from slacking off was that he had started to find a lot of the stuff kind of interesting. Oh, not all of it. For every man-eating plant out there, there were twice as many perfectly

harmless ones, but history was actually kind of cool when you read it less like a history textbook and more like a military book. He still couldn't wade through all the various developments creating the International Confederacy of Wizards, or the names of the Ministers of Magic, or the creation of a regularized standard of wand production, without yawning and his thoughts starting to drift, (several of his books had found themselves shoved back under the bed, abandoned, despite his resolve) but reading about various battles? That was just wicked. Some of the stuff some of these Dark Lords had come up with had been just gross (he shuddered, remembering a section on the torture techniques of one seventeenth century Austrian Dark Lord) but it had also been sort of sickly fascinating. And the next section, which described how it was because of the barbarity of that wizard's tortures that enough people rebelled, and comparing that act to several other incidents in history where Dark Lords had crossed over the line from being feared-more-than-hated to being hated-more-than-feared... well, yeah, he was finding it all unexpectedly interesting.

Which was good, because although he had, in fact, included a few more DADA books in his order than he'd perhaps led Hermione to believe, he'd held true to mainly focusing on subjects that didn't require casting. This way, he'd figured, when he got back to Hogwarts where he could cast spells, he wouldn't have to waste extra time on things like potions or herbology.

His nocturnal progress was somewhat slower, but he'd kept at it. He was, he thought, nearly ready. It'd been well and fine to simply do his chores and retreat to his room for the beginning of the summer, but he had to meet with Ron. Had to talk to him in person. For that he had to be able to move about freely. His relatives and he had existed in a state of happily ignoring each other, (save for when Harry took directions on various chores), but now he needed more. He'd never actually expect his relatives to help him with anything, but he needed to make sure they wouldn't hinder him, either. Which, he knew, they'd do for spite if given the chance.

So he'd needed something to... convince them.

His uncontrolled magic was the key.

In the absence of emotion, deliberately calling on uncontrolled magic took a strange twist of thought and formidable power, but it wasn't tremendously difficult. Trying to tame it enough, once released, to ensure nothing happened he didn't wish to happen, and all that happened was what he did wish to happen, was what took ferocious strength of mind. Once he'd learned to call it up without emotion, (a feat of several weeks alone) it'd taken weeks more of practice before he learned enough control to make sure he could do the most basic of things - gather enough magic to force electric appliances to flicker, cause things around him to shake, or the air to begin feeling heavy. He wasn't positive how much more it'd take to shatter glass – thank Merlin he'd thought to get his glasses charmed unbreakable in his first year – but he was pretty sure he could do it without difficulty.

Tomorrow, he'd talk to his uncle about his new status of freedom. His letters to Hermione and Ron were already waiting, and Hedwig knew to be back by tomorrow eve.

Part of him hoped there would be no need for... dramatics, but he knew his aunt and uncle too well to really expect everything to go smoothly.

The other part of him was looking forward to it.

But no matter what happened, tomorrow was going to be different.

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Chapter End

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Notes:

- Delay due to incorporating new information provided by the seventh book.

- No, Dumbledore did not use legilimency on Harry. He's been a teacher and the headmaster of a school for decades, you think he doesn't have a good idea what Harry is scheming towards?

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Next Chapter:

Something had happened with his parents and Harry. Something that had to be related to his sister's death. What it was, he didn't know, but they'd grown subtly uncomfortable with his mentions of his best friend, and his mother delicately discouraging of their friendship.

He'd started simply not mentioning Harry at all, and noted carefully their hidden relief.

In his mind, Harry's words repeated.

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## Chapter Five: Temper the Steel

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"You want me to what?" The glass tabletop of the side table rattled audibly under the force of his uncle's mug as it was set down. Harry's eyes flicked down to it momentarily, then he returned his gaze to his uncle, reminding himself - again - that he wasn't trying to escalate this. However difficult uncle sometimes makes that...

"I want you to sign the permission form to let me go to Hogsmeade, and to give me the money for a cab to King's Cross so I can go to Diagon Alley on Sunday."

"We already make the trip twice a year just so you can go to that freakish school. Now you want us to pay for it whenever you feel like going shopping? Preposterous! And you can forget ever getting that formed signed. Now get back to your chores, the house better be spotless when Marge comes next week!"

He took a deep breath, wondering, for a second, if he was really going to do this. Really thought he could. Then he let the breath out, carefully controlled, and stared at his uncle's face. "Uncle," he said, "I'm not asking. I'm demanding."

His uncle stilled, and his face began to turn red, before he relaxed and let out a harsh bark of laughter. "And what are you going to do? You can't use magic during the summer, or you'll be expelled. No, I think you'll not be demanding anything. In fact, I don't think you'll be bothering us at all. A few weeks in your room ought to do you some good."

His uncle was looking entirely too pleased with the idea; if he didn't act fast, he'd find himself forcibly dragged to the room, and locked in till weeks beyond the day Ron said he would meet him. And that... that he couldn't let happen.

"Wrong," he said, and he was slightly surprised at how coolly it came out, because although he often baited his uncle, he'd never outright defied him.

"Wrong?" his uncle echoed.

"Wrong. It's not that I can't do magic over the summer, uncle, it's just that I can't use my wand. And now that I've figured a way around it, if you ever want any peace ever again, you'll comply to my demands." Please let this work. I don't want to have to find out whether or not I'm bluffing. Reaching out, he gathered his magic as he'd practiced for the past month, and as the lights began to flicker, he raised an eyebrow at the figure across the room from him.

"What the- boy! Are you doing this?"

"Sign the paper, and give me the money. I'll pay you back."

His uncle looked more upset than furious - and uncertain, which boded well, he thought - until the tableau was broken by an unexpected appearance.

"Vernon? Vernon! The power's gone out, I knew we should have switched over to Energon, Ceilia and I were talking about it just this Tuesday..." As his aunt stepped into the living room, her words faltered. "Vernon? What's... What's going on?"

He spoke before his uncle had time to. "It's nothing, Aunt Petunia." He didn't take his eyes off his uncle, "Uncle Vernon was just going to sign my permission form, and lend me some money."

"What the... Vernon? Is he..." Her voice dropped to a horrified whisper, "is he doing this?" He twitched, upping the amount of magic he was gathering, hoping to end it quickly.

Several knick-knacks across the room started shaking, and a persistent rattling drew his eyes back to the side table, where the glass mug shaking on the glass table began to make noise. Unfortunately, the noise also seemed to shake his relatives out of their shock rather than shocking them further, and his aunt shrieked, "Vernon! Make him stop!"

His wife's presence seemed to propel his uncle forward. "Now boy, stop this immediately." In the battle between horror and anger, horror had lost, and his uncle's face was rapidly getting redder.

He gritted his teeth, refusing to back down. "Sign the paper."

"Boy!"

The shaking around the room got more pronounced, and the glass mug had begun to walk itself closer to the edge of the side table. His own temper was beginning to slip. "Sign it."

"If you don't stop now..." His uncle took one step forward, then another.

Don't let this turn physical. He watched the large man warily, "Sign. It."

Finally reaching the end of the table, un-noticed, the mug tipped over and landed on the carpeted floor, breaking in several pieces with a loud crack. His aunt let out a small scream. His uncle lunged, and he felt a start of alarm rush through him -

Every piece of glassware in the room exploded.

What? How-?

His aunt gave a louder scream. His uncle shouted as several shards of glass sprayed across his pants. Dudley ran into the room, then



froze, staring.

Did I-?

"You, what, boy-"

"Uncle Vernon," He began, cutting across whatever his uncle had been about to say. "Sign the note, and have the money waiting tomorrow morning. Or it'll only get worse." Then he spun and stalked up to his room.

It wasn't 'til the door was closed and locked that he let himself slump against the door, shaking, as he stared at his hands.

I didn't mean to do that.

--

Come on, Ron. Five minute's past - and you were the one who picked the time and place. Green eyes flicked over the crowd visible through Forets cues' front windows, and he shifted restlessly in his seat as another customer entered the shop. Nobody was staring at him, but he was still twitchy from the previous murmurs that had followed him down the Alley, and the begged notice-me-not charm from Forets cue wasn't invisibility. If someone looked hard enough, they'd realize something was out of place.

And eventually, someone probably would. Subtle though the spell was, he was in a cafe full of trained wizards and witches. Too much to hope for, that the quiet blurring of the spell, the subtle twist that guided minds with a gentle nothing to see, nothing of interest, would not of itself rouse inquest. Wizards and witches were so bloody curious. They'd tickle a dragon to see what happened. Put a misdirection ward up, and they'd want to know why.

On the street outside, sunlight glinted gold off hair a distinctive

red-orange hue. Weasley hair, he thought, and Ron hadn't been joking when he called it one of the more distinctive wizarding family traits.

He kept his seat, waiting, as Ron stepped into the shop, eyes scanning for him. The notice-me-not charm served as a thin veil, but it would not hide against someone who knew exactly what he was looking for, knew that it was there to be found... Ron's blue eyes met his, and under focused attention the charm's influence burned away like morning fog touched by sunlight.

He nodded to his friend, and Ron crossed the floor to sit across from him.

He wanted to say hello and I was worried and I'm sorry, but he didn't know what Ron knew. Almost two months since he'd seen Ron last, and no letters during the summer. The terse reply he'd received from his missive of a few days ago had offered little hope, although he took it as a good sign Ron hadn't simply told him to go to hell. His stomach was in knots about what Mr. and Mrs. Weasley might have told him - how they might have told it. So instead he only asked, "What do you want to know?"

"Everything." Flat. Demand and plea in one.

Which meant- "Your parent's haven't told you anything?"

"No." The short reply carried an universe of emotion within it, halting the wave of relief he'd felt in its tracks. In Ron's voice bitterness mixed with hurt, betrayal touched pain, and all of it was almost buried under the fierce thrum of an anger that burned. "They're not ready. Or I'm not ready. Someone's not ready. They weren't very clear." One hand clenched hard on the table, knuckles white. "But I went to them and asked them who gave Ginny the diary, and they said they couldn't tell me. Couldn't. It's not can't, it's won't. They lied to me - for almost two months, they've lied to me. They buggering well know

who." Ron's gaze shifted to meet his straight on. "And so do you." Blue eyes burned into him and it was - hard - not to flinch.

Ron had always had a hair-trigger temper; quick to take insult, quick to jump into a fight. Prickly, protective and defensive at turns, and God knew he could hold a grudge over the silliest of things. But this, this was different. This wasn't anger. This was rage. This was the urge to strike out, to hurt, as he was hurting, to ease your own suffering with the suffering of others. It was something he'd never seen in Ron before, and for one second he almost doubted the wisdom in sharing what Lucius Malfoy had done. Almost doubted because, God, he could almost understand now the decision Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had made. Because the tone in Ron's voice scared him; because he was afraid that with Ron feeling like this, he was more than capable of doing something very, very, stupid.

Almost.

But he had his own memories of rage. He'd felt it on a cold stone floor, as Ginny's life drained away. He'd felt it in an office later, staring at Lucius Malfoy's contemptuous face. He'd called it and chained it and used it in the weeks past, twisting emotion into a weapon to rouse magic within him. If he was an adult maybe Ron would scare him, maybe the idea of a kid angry enough to kill would scare him.

But he was a kid, too. And he had his own body-count.

And this was Ron.

"Okay," he said finally. "Let me start from when we separated..."

--

My best friend killed my sister. Ron stared down at the wizarding chess board, pieces temporarily in suspended sleep, their quiet and frozen figures a fierce contrast from the lively personalities the

animation charms gave them. He reached out a freckled hand and picked up a pawn. Or sacrificed her. The result was the same. And knowing this, he was supposed to do... what?

He had a good idea how he'd have reacted if he'd learned about it at the same time he'd learned of Ginny's death. He'd have gone for his friend with his fists. But he wasn't the same Ron he'd been, those last few weeks of last term. Not after the past two months.

Months of silences, of catching his mother crying when she thought he couldn't see. Months of an emptiness at the table, of a subdued father and older brothers who were acting wrong. The twins spent more time with each other than ever, and they'd stopped playing pranks since their first one had resulted in their mother screaming in fury before breaking down into tears. She'd apologized, but everyone had seen the cracks, and no one could forget.

There'd not been a prank since.

And Percy... he didn't know what was going on with Percy. His brother had always been a stuck up prig, and although the arrogance seemed partially intact, the pompous self-importance was gone. So was the overbearing nosiness that had prompted an older brother to look unwanted into his business - and just occasionally help him with it, albeit with an attitude that had made Ron want to deck him.

He'd never thought he'd miss it.

But he'd spent most of the summer alone, out in the field or in his room. Playing chess against the Black King, wondering, waiting. Needing to know what happened. Wanting to forget. Feeling betrayed. Knowing his parents were lying to him. And with every broken tradition in his family, every silence, every tear, hating. Hating so hard and fiercely that he scared himself sometimes, because he was beginning to wonder if soon he'd be nothing but hate. The days passed and weeks turned to months, and he didn't know who to hate,

didn't know what to target, and the rage had only burned brighter instead of burning out.

There'd been a few weeks in there that he'd hated Harry too.

He'd been furious at him for failing, for walking away unharmed when Ginny was dead, furious at him for living. But he had remembered tear tracks, and exhaustion, and black robes that didn't quite manage to hide the blood. He had remembered a limp, and a quiet voice, and a sword that gleamed like silver, even in darkness. And as a few weeks had passed, the hate had faded.

And now, now when otherwise he might have expected to find loathing there where once he'd felt love for his friend... it wasn't. He'd forgiven Harry months before he ever learned the details of the matter, and now that he knew...

He also knew other things.

He was the only one willing to tell me the truth. Willing to tell me who was responsible. Willing to swear vengeance.

No, he didn't need to hate Harry. (And there was relief in deciding that, because he thought it might have broken him, had he been forced to shatter his friendship with the only person he'd still been sure he could trust.) Not when Harry had given him the thing he wanted (second) most in the world.

(The killer of) his sister.

--

For the first time in over a decade, Albus Dumbledore had had more than two applicants for the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts Teacher for the upcoming school year.

If the circumstances behind it hadn't been so tragic, he might have been able to take pleasure in the change.

The demise of a student in and of itself would have merited only a brief mention in the international papers, if not for the extraordinary events that had surrounded it. Young Miss Weasley's death had necessitated publicly calling the aurors in to sweep the chamber before the school could be declared as once again safe, and after that there had been no way to keep the events out of the news entirely. As the rumors got out, it was inevitable the reporters would follow. The still publicly unanswered question of the missing Slytherin heir. The opening of a lost and fabled chamber. The slaying of a millennia old magical beast by a boy who legends had already begun to spring up around. The scandal was too much, the news too juicy.

Hogwarts - and her students - were in the international spot light.

And for the first time in over a decade, the teaching position had something interesting enough to make skilled practitioners of Defense willing to take their chances on the curse.

A mystery. A legend. And in the form of an slightly-built thirteen-year-old boy, a budding myth.

He felt tired suddenly, and reached out to stroke Fawkes head; the phoenix responding with a soothing trill. It didn't seem fair, that Harry's trials would be exploited for the good of the school...

Harry, who had, for the second year running, been forced to face his defense teacher at wandpoint - admittedly to their detriment.

He snorted, humor an unexpected quirk of light in his dark mood. Maybe he ought to warn the professor. See if that dampened their enthusiasm any.

But humor aside, he'd made it clear. The new Professor could

investigate the events of the last year as he wished, but he was not to interrogate three students about it. Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Harry Potter had been declared off limits.

It was the least he could do for them.

And sadly, it was far less than they deserved.

--

Harry sighed as he stared up at the ceiling of his room. He'd come so close to not coming back after his brief freedom in Diagon. Especially since, from the looks his aunt and uncle had been giving him as they shoved money into his hand earlier that morning, he wasn't entirely sure he'd not wake up one night with his uncle trying to smother him with a pillow. The only thing that had forced him back was not seeing any other option. Somehow, he thought even in the Wizarding world a thirteen year old living entirely unaccompanied by an adult in a hotel would raise eyebrows. He didn't want people thinking he'd run away. He especially didn't want people talking to the Dursleys, trying to figure out why.

Not until he figured out what had happened. Or why, rather, the what was obvious. Too much power, too little control. But I could have hurt somebody - really hurt them. Which would be acceptable if I meant to do it, but... not just because I was surprised while holding onto power. Not when I might be surprised when my friends are around. He'd come within minutes of writing a panicked letter to Hermione - Hermione, who always knew the answers to his questions, or would work tirelessly to find them until she did - but he'd come to his senses at the last moment. Or chickened out. The descriptions were probably equally valid, as he considered what would be Hermione's likely opinion on his tactics to force his uncle's compliance. The thought of that lecture was enough to make him wince.

But... well, he hadn't noticed until yesterday's wake-up call, but he

wasn't sure his experiments in uncontrolled magic weren't having a bad effect. He'd spent the first months of his first year learning control, discipline, and how to channel and shape his magic to his will. Until the incident in Dumbledore's office with the sword, he hadn't manifested any accidental or uncontrolled magic in over a year. But now...

Now when he got too unsettled, his magic swirled. Startle him too badly while he was working with it, and things got broken. He felt like he could work with his magic easier, but he didn't like being this out of control. It was dangerous and it was stupid - and he only had a few weeks to get it under control before the start of the term.

Otherwise, well.

The moment he shattered every potion vial in Snape's potion labs on accident, Hermione's lectures would be the least of his worries.

Rolling over on his side, he propped himself on an elbow, and stared at the wadded half-inch ball of paper he'd set on the bed stand, visualized goal firmly in mind. He grinned as it lifted into the air by the barest increments... but it lifted. And slowly, slowly, it moved. Even the half hour it took before he'd been able to finish negotiating five painstaking circles around his desk lamp (an improvement from the four he'd been able to manage last week) couldn't dull his spirit. The surge of excitement he felt on it finding its way back to where it started made him grin... and set the ball on fire.

He swore as he dropped his sweater on top of it, putting it out.

Right, lets try that once more.

Taking a deep breath, he began the exercise again. He'd be at Hogwarts in two weeks, and lack of control was not an acceptable option.



Not when he'd be around his friends.

--

Her friends had changed.

Peeking around the edge of the large tome in her lap, Hermione bit her lip and watched them worriedly. Well, of course they'd change, she reminded herself, after Ginny's death, we all changed.

Even me.

Not so much because of Ginny's death - it was a horrible tragedy, but truthfully, she'd barely known the younger girl, aside from a vague awareness of her as "Ron's little sister." Yearmates in Hogwarts - especially during the younger years - tended to be tight-knit within their own circle. She shared neither dorm room nor classes with Ginny Weasley, and the redhead had been far too shy to approach Harry Potter or his best friends.

But Ginny's death...

She glanced up again. Ron was scowling out the window at the passing countryside and Harry was brooding over a book. She'd glanced at the title earlier: "An Analysis of Auror Actions in the Grindelwald Conflict." Four months ago, Harry would never have picked that book up. Four months ago, Ron would never be so quiet.

Four months ago, she wouldn't have been just sitting there, afraid to break the silence.

They're hurting. They're hurting and they're furious, and I have no idea what to do.

And there's something they're not telling me.

Hermione was smart. She knew she was smart. It was a fact, determined by her genes, and her high IQ was as unremarkable to her as her bushy hair. A gift from her parents, born of them. Nothing for her to be proud of. The use she'd put that intelligence to, however... The way they greeted each other on the train. The way Harry's not pushing Ron to talk. The way Ron isn't demanding an explanation from Harry... sometime over the summer, they talked. Letters or a meeting, they talked.

Something neither of them had done with her. Despite the letters she'd sent to them.

She absent mindedly flipped a page, wondering if her aggravation was irrational. She didn't expect them to tell her everything but.. darn it, one of them could say something to her! Why the hell didn't she choose females for best friends? If Harry and Ron were girls, they'd already have talked everything out months ago. What had happened, how they felt, what to do next. Instead, she got... silence.

A whole summer of silence.

The sliding of the compartment door interrupted her brooding, and she dropped her book on accident. Wincing - her book! - she leaned down and scooped it up, then sat back up. Ron was sitting right across from her, so she had a direct view of his face as he registered who was standing in the doorway - and rage flashed across his it. Surprised, she whipped her head around.

Draco Malfoy and his minions were standing in the doorway. "Well well, look who's here. Scarhead. Mudblood. Weasel."

She glared, setting her book on the seat compartment next to her, leaving her hands free. Ron already had his wand gripped in his hand, knuckles white from pressure. Harry was staring at Draco coolly, face otherwise expressionless. She spoke up without much hope, "Go away, Malfoy. No one wants you here."

He stuck his nose higher in the air, and continued on, drawling and snooty at his best, "Why so down? Mourning the littlest Weasel?" She gasped, astonished that even he would dare bring that up. Ron's hands clenched.

Harry slowly stood. "Back off, Malfoy. Back off right now." She glanced at his face, then shivered. His eyes were like green chips of ice. Which is why she could barely believe Draco's stupidity when he opened his mouth again.

"I don't know what you're crying about, I'd have thought the Weasels would be happy. One less mouth to feed. Unless, perhaps, they'd made other arrangements?" It was like watching a train wreck, Hermione thought, as Malfoy's voice turned slyly insinuating. "Is that why you're so worked up, Potty? Had you and the Weasel worked out an arrangement for when the girl grew up? Something for her to earn her keep? Though the family's poor enough, probably wouldn't take more than a few galleons... "

The last word was practically drowned out by Ron's bellow of rage. She was still staring in shock when Ron's fist hit Malfoy's face.

Blood literally flew. Malfoy dropped his wand and stumbled backwards out of the compartment, shrieking like a girl. Ron followed him. She watched, not quite sure what to do. On the one hand, she probably should stop this, but the things Malfoy had said... Then she saw Crabbe going for his wand, and the decision was suddenly very easy. "Stupefy! Stupefy!"

The hours of practice in her room paid off. Her pronunciation was perfect; her flick precise. The additional difficulty of actually channeling her magic into the spell was minimal. Two beams of light flicked out; two bodies hit the floor.

Harry's surprised glance felt good. She met it with narrowed eyes.

The smallest of smiles touched his face, then another strangled shriek brought their attention back to Ron and Malfoy.

She winced, seeing the blood on Malfoy's face, and stepped forward to interfere-

Harry's arm shot in front of her. "No. Don't, Hermione."

She met his gaze squarely. "He's taking it too far."

"Hermione, there's things you don't know." She wasn't surprised by the information, but neither was she pleased. Nor did that change her opinion. Her expression must have communicated that, because he sighed. "Hermione, trust me. Please."

Trust him. After the last two years, how could she not trust him? But... "Two minutes. After that, if you don't do something, I will." Looking back at the pair on the floor, she winced again.

It was a slaughter.

Ron was taller, heavier, and meaner. He'd also been raised with five older brothers. Without a wand, Draco never really had a chance.

The commotion was starting to catch attention, though, noise dampening spells on each compartment or not. A small crowd had begun to gather. Draco was curled around himself, barely fighting, and down the corridor Hermione could see prefect badges. "Harry!"

He nodded and stepped forward. "Ron." The redhead didn't turn. "Ron!" A wave of something thrummed through the room, then a gust of cold air. It caught the redhead's attention; blue eyes dark with fury glanced back. Green met them unflinching. Then, quieter: "Ron, enough." A glance at the worried and furious faces approaching, some bearing badges, and he added, "Besides, authority is here."

Ron followed his glance, looked down, then rose and stepped back. Looked down at the unmoving Malfoy again, gaze poisonous. "If you ever call Ginny a whore again, I won't stop here." Ignoring the gasps around him as the comment carried, he whirled and strode back into the compartment, stepping over Crabbe and Goyle's stunned bodies without pause.

"Hermione." The word was enough to let her know what Harry wanted, and she stared at him hard for a second before she decided making sure Ron was okay was more important than raking Harry over hot coals.

But as soon as this was over, they were going to have a talk.

Rue touched his expression, and he nodded. She just narrowed her eyes and sniffed, then stepped carefully around the bodies in front of the door to the compartment, sliding the door fully closed behind her as she entered.

She looked at Ron, who was back to staring at the countryside.

A long talk.

--

Watching Hermione imperially dismiss him with a sniff, he shook his head. I'm going to pay for that, I suspect.

Trust me, he'd said. And she'd been willing to follow his lead, aware he had information she didn't. But if he didn't justify himself sufficiently later...

All of Hogwarts knew that he and Ron had tempers. Far fewer realized Hermione did too.

And in defense of what she thought was right, she could make even

Ron back down.

Although speaking of Ron in a temper, it was time to face the results of his friend loosing his. And - the thought occurred to him in a lightening flash of realization - possibly help his redheaded friend's plan along. If he could pull it off. Mind hurriedly calculating what he needed to do; how best to set the tone, as it were, he turned to face the gathering student crowd.

Distracted, concentrating, he was unmindful of the picture he made: wand held in one hand with unconscious ease and three bodies on the floor behind him, face filled with neither trepidation or anger, only calm expectation. The sight checked the prefect who'd just pushed to the front for a second - but only for a second. Then the rising murmur of the gathered crowd behind him seemed to recall him to business, and the Prefect regained his composure.

"Harry Potter, what is going on here?"

-

And why, thought Adrian Greengrass, isn't our resident celebrity third year more concerned?

The gaze that met his inquiry was not dismissive, but it was coolly unconcerned; as if having been caught in the midst of a fight - one that apparently resulted in two unconscious students, and one groaning on the floor in pain - was of no importance. An impression strengthened by the calm way Potter met his eyes and spoke, half to him and half to the gathered crowd: "Malfoy came into our compartment without permission, refused to leave when asked, and insulted us. When he accused Ginny of being a whore, the Weasley family of participating as her pimp, and myself as one likely to buy her services, Ron had enough. Unfortunately for Malfoy, his skill at offering provocation outstripped his ability to back it up."

And he consequently got what he deserved. The younger boy was smart enough not to say it out loud, but it echoed in the silence, and in the hushed whispers between watching students. If it truly had played out as Potter was imitating, the consequences to Malfoy's social position would be far reaching. That sort of blatant insult could only be considered gauche coming from one of the House of Slytherin, and, had they both been of the age of majority, would likely have resulted in a formal challenge to a duel. Young as they were, if Malfoy had handily won the scuffle, he could have passed it off as an attempt to goad a less self-controlled wizard into hasty action, and won a certain cachet of ruthless practicality. Such tactics might have resulted in appreciation within his house, even if others were more likely to have seen it as sheer cruelty. But to have tried such a maneuver, and been handily - and publicly - slapped down with effortless ease...

But the social consequences for the young Malfoy heir could wait. "That explains Malfoy. What happened to Crabbe and Goyle?"

Potter raised an eyebrow, "The moved to interfere."

He waited, but apparently, that was all the explanation Potter felt merited.

Adrian ignored the new whispers to that tidbit from the crowd, more concerned with the teen in front of him. Although the younger boy's tone was not insolent, the sheer unconcern for what had been a blatant violation of one of the strictest school rules, his apparent complete comfort in the face of disapproving authority, his total lack of anything that even hinted at regret, or even trepidation... Adrian had been a prefect for two years, though he'd not managed to snag the coveted Head Boy slot this year. He was a far cry from being inexperienced with his duties, and he knew how normal boys reacted to the unsaid threat of the wand of authority coming down. Sarcastic, contrite, blustering, scared, defiant, insolent, cowed - he'd dealt with them all. Calm acceptance was something new.

But not, thankfully, something that was likely to undermine his authority, or something he didn't know how to deal with. And, in any case, a violation of this magnitude merited referral to one of the professors anyway. In the meantime... "Very well. You will discuss this with the professors once we arrive at Hogwarts. Until then, you are confined to this train compartment. Abigail," he nodded to one of the Ravenclaw sixth year prefects, "will stand guard outside the compartment until we get to the castle, then escort you to wait in the Headmaster's office. In the meantime," he swept his eyes across the watching students, "no one else is allowed in. Darchart and I will take the Misters Malfoy, Goyle, and Crabbe to another compartment, also to be separated. You will have your chance to tell your story whenever the professors decide to deal with you. Understand?"

"Yes, Prefect." Harry Potter nodded, deepening it, somehow, into the slightest of bows acknowledging the crowd without being flashy or awkward looking, then without waiting for further dismissal, turned and opened the compartment door. Watchers caught a glimpse of Hermione Granger, looking up from her book, wand in one hand, and Ron Weasley's profile turned out the train window as Potter stepped through, murmuring something too soft to be heard. Then the door slid closed without so much as a backward glance. After a moments hesitation, Abigail moved to take up position next to the door.

He sighed, then turned his glance to Darchart, a seventh year Hufflepuff prefect he knew to be both sharp as a tack and unflappable. "Looks like a simple Stunning Spell for Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy's the only one who appears damaged. Lets take them up near the Prefect's compartment. We can evict students from one of the nearby rooms, and Smithers knows a few healing spells. As for you all," he addressed the still staring crowd, "Scat. Anyone still here in thirty seconds will loose ten points for their house."

The students scattered like leaves in an autumn wind. Two innervates and a mobilicorpus later, and he and Darchart had two



complaining boys, and one still insensate one, on the way to the front of the train. He tuned out the whining protestations of innocence - seeming all the more disgusting contrasted against Potter's calm acceptance of his actions and their consequences - one thought uppermost in his mind.

That this year wasn't beginning any quieter than the last one had ended.

And - surprise, surprise - the Gryffindor Trio were at the centre of this, too.

-

It'd been at least ten minutes since the door clicked shut, Abigail leaving them alone in silence.

Harry watched Hermione staring around at the Headmaster's office, and for the first time in hours, actually felt like cracking a smile. He'd forgotten - unlike Ron and himself, Hermione had most likely never had cause to visit this hallowed center of educational authority.

The portraits looked down on them - some in suspicion, some in curiosity - and the murmurs were somewhat intimidating, as past headmasters speculated on their crimes, looks, and general character. Ignoring them, Harry glanced around. Having been in the headmaster's office before, he wasn't just marveling, but rather looking for two things in particular.

Or people, perhaps. If they were both sentient, was that more correct? Lack of two legs and arms notwithstanding, it somehow seemed a bit wrong to call those who had helped him just things. Still, scanning his surroundings, he didn't see the Sorting Hat - then shook himself, realizing that, of course, the hat would be down in the great hall tonight. As for the other... it looked like Fawkes, too, was out and about somewhere. Feeling just a touch disappointed, he shrugged

and turned toward Ron. He was about to make a comment on one of the various spinning gizmos on Dumbledore's desk, when the office door opened.

Dumbledore entered first, clothes merrily riotous with colors and sparkles. Behind him, clothing and hair tailored severely, McGonagall strode in. He watched, dreading it, but the billowing black robes of his most hated professor failed to make an appearance. Nor did Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle.

Dumbledore moved behind his desk, unusually solemn, and sat, watching them across the desk with a grave air. To his right McGonagall stood, lips pressed together firmly. Harry glanced at Hermione and Ron, then faced forward. Staring down the prefect, he hadn't felt ill at ease, but faced with Dumbledore's grave mien, he began to feel a trickle of apprehension. For a few seconds, the office was quiet, then Dumbledore leaned forward, robes making an audible rustling sound in the quiet.

"I'm afraid we have a serious incident to deal with. Abigail Carstairs and Anthony Greengrass have already given me their impressions of the events, as has Rafael Smithers - who, I will note, because of his knowledge of healing spells, was the one to tend to Mr. Malfoy on the train. At this point, I ask that you tell us your side of the story."

Since Dumbledore seemed to address the question to him more than the others, he took a deep breath, then responded. "Malfoy came into our compartment without us asking, then immediately started calling us names. When Hermione asked us to leave, he called Ginny-" Under Dumbledore's level stare, he faltered at actually saying the word, "Anyway, he implied that the only reason I was upset that she was gone was because we'd had an arrangement for the future.." he trailed off, desperately hoping the aged Headmaster understood what he was trying to say. "You know?"

Dumbledore pressed his lips together, but nodded, face still calm.

"Yes, Mr. Potter, I understand. Then what happened?"

"Ron hit him." The silence after he said it seemed loud, so he hurried into his next sentence. "Anyway, Malfoy dropped his wand, then tried to hit Ron back, then Crabbe and Goyle started moving toward them, and Hermione did this spell-" Here he paused, turning to look at her, "What was it, Hermione?"

"It was the Stunning Curse, Headmaster. Stupefy."

He nodded, "So Hermione cast the spell on them, and they dropped, and meanwhile Ron and Malfoy were fighting. Then the prefects arrived and separated us, and took Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle off somewhere, then confined us to our train compartment. And that was pretty much it."

"I see. Succinctly put, Mr. Potter. Ms. Granger, Mr. Weasley, is there anything you want to add?"

"No, Headmaster."

"No, Headmaster."

"Very well, we will be speaking to Misters Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle momentarily, as they were delayed by waiting for Mr. Malfoy to be checked out by Madame Pomfrey. Assuming their story collaborates yours, we will probably not meet again on this matter. If the discrepancies are significant, you will be called to another meeting tomorrow. Professor McGonagall will give you your punishment after we have interviewed the Slytherin students, and I and the heads of both houses have conferred."

"Punishment?" came Ron's unbelieving question. "After what they said?"

The headmaster looked down at Ron above his half-moon glasses.

"Regardless of how you were provoked, it was you who still decided to initiate the first act of violence. According to even yourselves, Mr. Malfoy was only using words, albeit ones clearly aimed towards being hurtful. Nonetheless, it was your decision to escalate, rather than to find a prefect, or respond also by only using words. This is a school - fighting among yourselves is not acceptable behavior. But should events have turned out as you describe, never fear - Masters Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle will have their own punishment."

Harry couldn't decide what he wanted to protest first, and while he was trying to decide, Hermione spoke up, "Sir, you keep saying if it turns out the way we described, isn't there a way for us to prove what happened magically? Like a pensive?"

"Yeah," added Ron, "Everyone knows Malfoy's a lying weasel."

"Mr. Weasley!" McGonagall remonstrated, and Ron flushed.

"Well, he is," he whispered to Harry; then, louder: "Sorry, professor."

Aside from a glance, Dumbledore seemed to ignore the side-play. "I'm impressed, Ms Granger. Where did you read about pensive?"

She flushed, "I was reading about the wizarding justice system over the summer, and they were mentioned regarding the applicable evidence."

"Ah. Well, I don't think such will be necessary in this case. I assure you, Professor McGonagall and I are very good at judging when a student is telling the truth. Is there anything else?"

"Yes!" Harry spoke up, "Look, even if Ron did throw the first punch, you can't argue that he deserved it. Not when Malfoy's father was the one who killed Ginny!"

"Mr. Potter!" Unlike Ron, he just ignored Professor McGonagall's

scandalized rebuke, keeping his eyes locked on the headmaster's, demanding he concede the point.

"Ah." It was said softly, then the headmaster sighed. "I'm sorry, Mr. Weasley, Mr. Potter, but there's no proof that Draco Malfoy is aware of his father's sins. Young Ms. Weasley's death is unfortunately public knowledge, and it's entirely possible Mr. Malfoy simply seized on such a weapon intending to be cruel, but without realizing quite how deep the spell would cut, coming from him."

Hermione spoke up, "But sir, if he did know, then surely using that is much worse than Ron merely hitting him? And Malfoy brags that his father tells him all sorts of things..."

"No. I'm sorry Ms. Granger, Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley, but the facts stand. Mr. Malfoy's cruelty is undeniable, and will be punished as it merits. But you three chose to escalate the problem, and you three were the ones to attack first. Under the circumstances, I can do no other than to assign a punishment also. Now, you should head down to the great hall; if you hurry you might be able to catch the tail end of the sorting, and will be able to enjoy the feast."

Harry stared at Dumbledore, feeling somewhat betrayed by the man's attitude, and more than a little irked by the assumption that attending a meal would placate them, but the man's expression didn't change. "Fine." He turned and made for the stairs, aware of Ron and Hermione following.

Outside the office, watching the gargoyle jump back into place, Hermione hissed, "I can't believe this!"

Ron opened his mouth to respond, when they spotted Snape turning the corner around the far end of the corridor, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle in tow. Harry grimaced, and shook his head. "Come on, let's go. Before they get here. But tonight." He met their eyes. "After the feast - tonight we need to talk."

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Hours later, settling into the cushions scattered around the far corner of the armory floor, Harry leaned back and smiled.

The thing about Hogwarts, was that most people forgot it was a castle. Or rather, they forgot what being a castle meant. To the current students, the teachers, even the WIZARDING population, it was a school. But it had, once, been a fully functioning castle built for defense as well as education. And when an invading force had threatened, the entire population of Hogsmeade found shelter within its walls.

All of which meant, even with the increase in population over the past 1,000 years, nooks, crannies, storage closets, empty dormitories, and abandoned storerooms were not in short supply.

Crammed close together for seven years, boarding schools had their own etiquette about private territory; and although the house-elves wouldn't allow clutter, trash, or signposts, over the years students had developed their own ways of subtly staking claim on "unoccupied" portions of the school.

He, Ron, and Hermione had found this place only a few months before the end of second year, buried away from the main population and thoroughways of the school. Because it was so isolated, even they didn't tend to use it that often, what with the library, common room, or even the great hall available as close and convenient common space. Last year had been a practical demonstration, though, that sometimes they just wanted to be alone. Now, if they needed to talk, work, or just hang out uninterrupted, it was a good place to come, and it certainly beat Moaning Myrtle's bathroom for illicit polyjuice brewing, should the necessity ever reoccur. At that thought his smile faded, as he glanced at Ron, Besides, the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets... I don't think either of us could stand the

memories, to work there again.

The Hogwarts armory was a pretty cool place, though. Unlike a muggle armory, it wasn't filled solely with steel, though there were more than a few swords and axes stored. Even those weren't exactly the same, seeing as muggle weapons weren't spelled and enchanted in their crafting to - once animated - seek out invaders and dispatch them on their own. Suits of armor stood by, waiting in quiescence, and their self-made comfortable little corner (through an admitted bit of creative rearranging) was completely screened from the door by a combination of those suits of armor, a stack of self-firing longbows, several barrels of a dry, iridescent green powder Hermione had never managed to identify, and a pile of mirrors designed to ensorcell any unwary invader who looked into them.

The last had nearly caused a great deal of trouble when they caught him and Hermione unaware. Ron's magical heritage had saved them all, as he'd heard of them in the stories his parents told him as a kid, and he'd managed to pull them away in time. Hermione had since researched the proper technique in dealing with them, and he himself had carefully angled them to be perhaps just a touch more visible and likely to catch an unwary interloper's eye.

It's not like it'd hurt them, after all.

And as the whispers following the revelation of his parseltongue ability had grown more malicious, he'd found himself more viciously defensive of any private territory he'd manage to stake out.

Hermione flopped down, finally finished rearranging her book bag, now filled to the brim with books she'd stopped to check out of the library on the way. "Well! That's done, then. Now," her eyes were determined, "talk to me."

He glanced at Ron, then back to her, "About what?"

She huffed. "Something's going on. You both practically disappear over the summer, then when you come back..." She shook her head, "Something's up. I want to know what."

Ron looked at him, and he shrugged. He'd never thought to hide it from Hermione anyway. "It's Lucius Malfoy."

Her eyes flicked to Ron, then back to him. "What about him?" Her tone was cautiously guarded.

Ron shook his head, incredulous, "What do you mean, 'what about him?' You can't imagine I'll let him get away with it, can you?"

"No! But..." She paused, then continued, "Look, I don't know what you've been doing over the summer, but I've been studying wizarding law and politics. And, among other things, what evidence is considered admissible in court. Memories don't count. Not enough to convict, anyway. There's too many ways of tampering with them. And I don't think we have anything else on him, right?"

That was Hermione. Intelligent, caring, and already researching the problem before he and Ron even approached her on it. But it'd also never occur to her to approach the problem from a less... legal, standpoint. "Hermione. We weren't planning on trying to take him to court."

"Then what?" She glanced back and forth between the two of them, "What do you intend? You can't intend to..." Perhaps reading something in their eyes, she shook her head, voice raising, "You can't really be... Harry, Ron, tell me you aren't planning on assassinating Lucius Malfoy. We can't just take things into our own hands! We're kids, Harry, we can't just do things like that! We can't just make him disappear-"

"No," interrupted Ron. "We can't." This time when Ron looked over to him there was a question in his eyes, and he met the gaze evenly.



Looking back at Hermione, Ron continued, "Harry already offered. I turned him down."

It wasn't often, he reflected, that he got to see Hermione speechless. Her mouth opened and closed soundlessly, as she looked between the two of them, clearly trying to gather her composure. Meanwhile, he was remembering the conversation he and Ron had had two weeks ago at Diagon Alley.

He had offered. Sworn to it. Somehow, somehow, the instant Lucius Malfoy turned his back to him in an empty place... He hadn't been studying many actual curses over the summer, but he'd made sure to learn at least one lethal one. And all it took was a moment.

And Ron had said no.

"It's not enough," Ron continued, fist clenching on the table, echoing words he'd spoken weeks earlier. "It's not enough to just kill him, letting him vanish mysteriously. Ginny deserves better than to have her death a dark secret, one we can't even talk about, 'cause then people will realize we had reason to get rid of Lucius Malfoy. She deserves justice. And that won't happen if Malfoy just disappears one day. No, he's going to die, but not until after every member of wizarding society knows he murdered a first year girl like a coward."

"Harry, Ron, I-" She stopped, shook her head, "I don't- Just." She shook her head again, one hand rising to run through her bushy hair. "Just. I can't- Give me a second, okay?"

"Hermione," he spoke softly, not wanting to push her, but... "I know this all seems sudden, and maybe we should have written you over the summer. But Ron and I had to talk first, and that didn't happen until just a few weeks ago. And after that," he sighed, "after that, well, we wanted to tell you in person. We're not asking you to agree to do anything Ron and I come up with, but we need to know if you're willing to help us take him down. We need to know: are you with us

on this?"

Her eyes sharpened, temper breaking through the tangle of confusion and trepidation on her face. She spoke sharply: "Don't be stupid, Harry." Then a grimace passed across her face, and she looked down at the papers in front of her, clearly thinking. He wondered if, perhaps, she was recalling their meeting with the Headmaster and their head of house only a few hours ago. Was recalling the outcome. Seconds passed, then a minute, and she sighed, and looked up again, "Look, I'm not agreeing to- well, to do anything right now, but you're right, he needs to pay. I mean, he killed Ginny, and all the adults - Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley - they all know about it. And they're not doing anything. And we are still kids, but maybe..." she trailed off, swallowed, then continued, "maybe if the adults won't do something about it, we have to. I mean, he committed a crime, and we're not supposed to just be silent and stand by when someone does something bad, so doing something... that'd be the right thing to do, right? But..." She clenched her hands, then opened them again, "But this is serious, guys. Really, really, serious. And I just... I don't want to rush into anything. Okay?"

Ron looked to be about to say something sharp himself, then looked at her, pale faced and bitten-lipped, then stopped himself. Nodded. "Okay."

He met their eyes, then nodded himself. "Okay."

She let out a long exhale, then leaned back. "Okay." She nodded. Quieter, glancing away from them: "Okay." Then back up, facing them again, "Okay. So, what are we going to do?"

Leaning forward, he began to recount their plan.

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Chapter End

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Notes:

- Apologies for the delay. It's been a crazy, crazy year, and making the transition from University student to military recruit has been...  
O.o It's amazing how much time getting ready for BMT (Bootcamp, for most of you civies) demands. Especially if your Marine older brother convinces your family to drag you off on a four week camping trip (without internet access!) to "get in shape." Although the Canadian Rocky Mountains are gorgeous this time of year, if anyone's interested. Just remember to pack warm clothing.

- Ron Weasley. What do you all think about Ron Weasley? Most people hate him (and from Canon, there's good reason.) But I always felt J.K. Rowling completely and utterly shortchanged him, by never, ever, letting him grow up. I mean, book seven, and she just repeated the interactions of book 4? ("I shall now betray my best friend - despite the fact I adopted him into my family - because I'm envious.") Was there a reason to keep him utterly insecure, jealous, and traitorous to a friend he's demonstrated a willingness to fight, protect, and die for? And does that characterization seem to be a bit conflicting to anyone else? Like, oh, it makes no bloody sense?

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Next Chapter:

The thing about wandless magic, was that it was a parlor trick, really. Oh, it had a certain mystery to it - and many wizards who couldn't so much as summon a spark without a wand might be impressed at the lighting of a candle by a wave of one's hands - but savvy wizards and

witches knew better. A powerful wizard with wandless magic could do some things a wizard with a wand could do, but no wizard - no matter how powerful - could ever achieve wandlessly things that a wizard with a wand couldn't do.

Wandless magic, then, was nothing more than a sub-optimal tool in a wizard or witch's potential arsenal. The ability, when one came right down to it, was only useful if one had lost their wand.

And a wizard or witch who would lose their wand... well, then it didn't matter how strong they were in raw power. At that point, victory or escape relied on his or her opponent screwing up. Far better for the intelligent wizard to win victory through practice and knowledge turned to talented dueling, rather than spend months of time on a skill that relied on an opponent's idiocy.

So experienced wisdom held. And so, of course, Harry Potter was determined to ignore them all and master it.

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## Chapter Six: Quenching the Blade

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Sitting in the great hall for breakfast the next morning was like being an exhibit in a museum. Interspersed with the common laughter, talking, eating, studying, and teasing, glances and whispers landed on their corner of the table more than once. Clearly, news of the fight on the train had gotten around the school already - and just as clearly, speculations were occurring.

Harry sighed, looking down at his toast as he buttered it. Some things at Hogwarts never seemed to change.

But Ron was a reassuring presence on his right, eating with his usual enthusiasm. Hermione was across from him, notebooks and coloured pens piled next to her. She was clearly ready to start inking in her schedule and study times as soon as Professor McGonagall came around.

Speaking of which, he could see their head of house down at the far end of the table, where the seventh and sixth years congregated. The exchange of words was fairly brief - and far too far away to be heard - but the looks down the table toward him and his friends were hard to miss. He quirked a brow, and wondered what was being said.

Instructions done, McGonagall continued on, handing out schedules as she went. When she came to them, she stopped instead of merely setting them down besides the trio. He twisted, looking up at her as she handed them their papers. "You three are to come with me to the headmaster's office. You have until I finish distributing your housemates' schedules, so finish up." Since they were sitting practically at the end, that meant soon.

"Yes, professor," came back in treble.

She nodded and moved on.

He looked over at Hermione, "Our punishment, you reckon?"

She nodded, already packing away her school materials. "In all likelihood."

Ron scowled, "If they want to assign me a detention, fine. But no way am I apologizing to that prick."

He shook his head, "I still can't believe we're getting punished over this." He didn't say it loudly, but wished he'd spoken quieter still, when Professor McGonagall spoke from behind him.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Potter, that you must learn there are consequences to your actions." The words themselves were only mildly reproofing, but her tone was – not heavy - but... layered with hidden meaning. Harry sucked in a breath. Ginny... He hunched his shoulders slightly, staring down, hurt. Feeling faintly betrayed. Besides him, Ron muttered a curse, low and harsh. Hermione gasped.

"Professor?" Hermione's voice had been surprised, disapproving - faintly horrified. He looked back up, trying to force emotion away. He thought he saw McGonagall's expression soften slightly, but he couldn't be sure because at that moment she turned away, walking toward the Headmaster's office.

"Come along," she commanded, over her shoulder.

The three of them exchanged glances, then followed as she bid.

He forced himself to pretend everything was normal as he followed behind. Tried not to be bitter. Of all people, he'd thought McGonagall wouldn't blame him. Wouldn't be angry.

But she does and she is. He clenched his fist against his book bag,

then forced himself to relax. It hurt. It hurt. But Ron and Hermione were with him. And besides...

He looked up and glared at her back, a flash of anger overcoming him. Fine. Blame me if you want. But you should have saved her. You're the adult. And you should have stopped Malfoy. And if you'd rather blame me than do either of those things...

Hell, he didn't need her anyway. He didn't need a head of house who wouldn't stand up for him. Wouldn't stand up for what was right. Wouldn't even talk to him.

I have Hermione. I have Ron. I have a plan.

It would be enough.

He'd make it enough.

-

Later, listening to Dumbledore speak, Harry simply felt grimly determined. Unlike their visit of the evening before, this time Snape and the three Slytherins were there as well. Perhaps from some misguided notion that they should all know each other's punishments for fairness's sake. Still stinging from McGonagall's words earlier, Harry didn't care. He'd do what he was supposed to do, but he wouldn't be sorry. And if they didn't like it, too bad.

Ron and Draco had both been assigned four weeks of detention with Filch so far, although thankfully not together. Both had been sternly warned against a repeat of the events. Crabbe, Goyle, and Hermione had all gotten two weeks, for participating in the fight, if not starting it. Both houses had lost seventy-five points. He guessed that meant it was his turn next.

Dumbledore watched him from over his half-moon glasses, still

serious and a little disappointed. "Mr. Potter, I hope that you have taken to heart this lesson as well. Fighting, regardless of provocation, is not allowed at this school. Now, you are all dismissed."

Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione, puzzled. But what was his punishment?

Malfoy - of course - asked the question uppermost in their minds. "But what about Potter?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Mister Potter, as the only one of the six of you who did not draw his wand, nor participated in verbal taunting or attempted to participate in the fight, is excused from punishment. I cannot assign him a detention for not interfering when half that train car simply watched as well. And from what the prefects say, he was the one to step in and stop the fight. Nonetheless," his tone was a warning, "If he is found in such a situation again, a punishment will be assigned."

Malfoy looked outraged, and Snape had his lips pressed together so hard they'd turned white. McGonagall looked somewhat disapproving, but whether that was specifically aimed at Harry escaping punishment, or at the three of them for getting into a fight in general, he didn't know. Ron and Hermione were both surprised, frowning a little bit. Neither looked mad at him - there was even a touch of glee in Ron's expression - but he could clearly read their thoughts. That Harry of all of them was getting off scot free, seemed unfair.

And really, it is, he thought, frowning himself. Yeah, when Dumbledore said it like that - that he'd not fought, where all the others had - it sounded fair. But he hadn't not fought because he was staying out of it. It was just that Hermione had taken care of Crabbe and Goyle, and Ron had been handily wiping the floor with Malfoy. There'd been nothing for him to do.

And in other circumstances, maybe he'd just gloat at getting off when



others were punished. But he couldn't gloat at getting off when his friends were. It wasn't that he felt guilty for going free, but that they had sworn just last night that they were together in this, now. Good or bad. He poked the thought for a moment, then nodded. It felt right. Besides, four or six hours a week for a few weeks wasn't going to hurt him. "If it's all the same," he said, voice steady, "I'd rather have the same punishment as my friends."

"Mr. Potter!"

He looked at her, feeling cold, remembering her words from earlier. "Professor McGonagall?"

She seemed to falter for a second, and Snape moved in, voice malicious, "You heard him, Headmaster. The boy's asking for it. Such insolence deserves a detention, surely?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "My ruling stands as it is, and it is final. Now, classes start in fifteen minutes, and you had best be getting to them." It was a dismissal not even Malfoy would protest.

They shuffled to the door, silent under the eyes of the still watching professors. Harry stood back, letting the Slytherins go first. Watching professors or no, he didn't want them at his back right now. As he started to descend the stairs, McGonagall spoke, "Miss Granger, please stay behind. There's a matter we must discuss about your schedule."

He and Ron automatically paused, waiting, but the Headmaster shook his head. "Off with you two, Miss Granger will be joining you in class momentarily."

He hesitated for a second longer, but what could they do? Shrugging, he nodded at Hermione, then headed down the stairs, Ron following. Herbology was first, and they'd have to hurry to get out to the greenhouses in time.

-

After Herbology came charms with Flitwick, a subject Harry was actually looking forward too. He's always been somewhat fond of charms, it just seemed so, well, magical. Astronomy had charts and memorization, potions its stirring and chopping, and History was, well, history, but in charms... In charms, he twisted his wand, and said a word, and things happened. And even after two years at Hogwarts, there were times when he just had to stop what he was doing for a moment, and grin, because magic was so incredibly cool.

The first day back, however, was almost never any fun. Instead of starting something new, the professor had them running over charms from previous classes, warming them back up to the subject after summer break. He'd written a list down on the board, the class assigned to go through thirty or so of the common, easy charms they'd picked up over the past few years. Harry rolled his eyes as Hermione finished the last one, having run through them darn near flawlessly, and indicated it was his turn. Carelessly, he flicked out his wand, intoning, "Wingardium Leviosa." And the wooden block, instead of obediently floating up to hover a foot or so above the desk as he'd envisioned... lay there.

He frowned.

Flicked his wand again, this time actually concentrating on what he was doing. And when his magic was summoned it - twisted - away from his wand. The block remained still, a silent condemnation.

Glancing up, he looked at Hermione. She was staring at him, worried.

He was getting pretty damn worried himself.

This time, he focused, forcing his magic to respond as he willed,

channelling it through his wand. Hell, he could do this without a wand, now that he had a wand in his hand the damn block would float-

The block shot up at speed, hit the ceiling, glanced off at an angle, and spun down and across the room, forcing Neville to dive off his chair to avoid being hit. It continued past him, hitting the floor with a loud clatter, momentum driving it spinning across the stone floor. It came to a rest against the classroom's right wall with an audible thud.

He looked around, to see everyone staring at him. He slunk a little lower in his chair.

Flitwick laughed, and with a flick of his wand the wood was floating back to him, the professor's spell a sharp contrast of perfect control. "Perhaps a bit less enthusiasm next time, Mr. Potter?" He ducked his head, blushing, and the tiny professor smiled. "Now, back to work all. You've only forty-five minutes remaining, so one of your pair should be done or almost done."

The students turned back to their work, the average volume of the classroom slowly returning to normal as students incanted various charms. Around the room things floated, changed colour, appeared, shrank, whistled, and otherwise descended into controlled chaos, but he just stared down at the block, deposited where Flitwick left it, feeling cold.

This... this was a problem.

-

Flitwick came by at the end of class to check up on them, Harry smiled. "Sorry about the levitation, sir."

"Oh, no worries, Mr. Potter. You're hardly the only one to get to enthusiastic on casting their first spell after a few months away. You

got through the list without any trouble then?"

Harry glanced down at the list which, in truth, he'd barely gotten a quarter of the way through. Smiled back across his desk at the diminutive professor. "Yeah, not a problem."

"Good! Then off you go, I'm sure you young people are looking forward to lunch." Flitwick moved down the row to the next pair, inquiring of them the same. As soon as the professor's attention was off him, he stuffed his notes into his book bag and stood, determinedly ignoring Hermione's curious and worried eyes. He had to get out of there.

He hurried out the door, past where Ron waited for them without pausing, not stopping at the exclamation behind him, nor slowing as Hermione and Ron caught up with him.

"Harry?"

He shook his head, glancing around. She had kept her voice low, but he was all too aware of the interested glances, drawn by Ron's exclamation when he'd first swept by the redhead and out the classroom door. "Not now, Hermione. Not here."

She followed his glance, then nodded. Looking a touch ticked and a touch worried, Ron checked the time, then spoke. "Grab some food from the Great Hall then head out by the lake?"

He calculated the chances of getting away from them for several hours on his own to quietly freak out over his magic not working - then glanced at Ron's determined expression. Sighed. Gave it up. "Grab some for me. I'll head down to the lake."

He was thankful they didn't argue, just peeled off towards the tables even as he continued on, striding through the castle doors. Headed down, across the courtyard, through the portcullis, then across the

grass. Jogged to a meadow they were all familiar with, near the water and shaded by trees, out of casual sight be from the front of the school but not so far away as to be near the forbidden forest. There, he dropped his bag, then shucked off his over-robe and draped it on the grass beneath him. Flopped down. Glanced around to confirm he was alone. Slowly reached out one hand, concentrating-

A branch from the forest floor wobbled a second before it obediently rose to hover before him. He stared at it a few moments, as it hung there steadily, not moving even as he dropped his hand back to his lap. Pulled out his wand. Stared at it. Looked back at the branch, still silently floating motionless in the air. Then dropped his head in his hands.

And now what?

-

"It started as a way to force my uncle into letting me see Ron." Crumbs from their sandwiches scattered across his lap and legs tucked under him, Harry looked at the two of them seriously. "I sorta scouted out the idea with Dumbledore - well, not exactly, cause I didn't tell him what I wanted it for, but he looked at me, so I figured that meant he knew..."

"Harry?"

He stopped. "Yes Hermione?"

"From the beginning."

He sighed, "Right." The beginning. Well, technically the beginning was Lucius Malfoy and the sword of Gryffindor... he glanced at Ron who looked focused and a little concerned, but was otherwise relaxed. Not brooding; not angry. And somehow, he just really didn't want to bring up Lucius Malfoy right then. So he shrugged and

reached out a hand toward the book that had served as an impromptu sandwich tray. Following the same course as the fallen branch earlier it rose - albeit slowly - a foot into the air.

Ron choked on his juice. "Blimey, Harry! When'd you learn to do wandless magic?"

He shook his head, "Not wandless. Uncontrolled."

Ron looked at the book still hovering between the three of them. "I don't know, mate. Looks pretty controlled to me."

He opened his mouth to refute that, then stopped. Yeah, he still had trouble with larger objects, and if he was transporting something fragile or valuable, he'd choose to carry it or use his wand. But he wasn't blowing things up or setting them on fire anymore. And there were implications to that. But later. For now, he shrugged. "Yeah, well. You should have seen me when it started."

"Harry." Hermione's finally broke in. "How are you doing that?"

He fumbled for words to explain a process he'd only felt. "It's- well, you take your magic, and you sort of tell it- Well, order it, really, but obviously not with words, and then you use it..."

"What do you mean?"

"It's sort of like seeing what is and what you want, then you just... make it happen. Using your magic. See?"

She was staring at him with utter incomprehension.

"It's hard to explain!"

She rolled her eyes, "Never mind - I'll look it up."

He slouched down, sulking.

Ron shook his head. "Look, it's really cool Harry can do wandless magic - I know some adults can do it, but I've never heard of a kid able to - but what does that have to do with whatever happened in class?"

Harry straightened up, glad he'd had some minutes to himself, groping for words to explain a concept he barely understood, most of what understanding he did have intuitive. "I'm not sure. But, I think.... Working without a wand - it's not at all like casting spells with one. Maybe that's why not many people do it - not when wandless magic is so much easier, quicker - more powerful. But it's - well, you call it differently. Use it differently. And I just spent three months doing nothing but using magic without a wand. And switching back was just-" he shrugged.

Hermione was watching him. "You're telling us you spent three months retraining yourself - entirely on your own initiative and without guidance from a teacher or even a book - to access and use magic in a way completely foreign to the steps and technique necessary to performing wandless magic, and now you're having problems switching back?"

He met her eyes guiltily, "Er, yes?"

"Harry!"

"I thought Dumbledore would have said something if it wasn't safe!"

"He probably would have," Ron broke in.

Harry looked at him "Except Ron, he kinda didn't."

"No," the redhead refuted, "I mean, everyone knows he's a bit batty, but he never does anything to let a student get hurt-"

"Like storing at the school a fabulously powerful and wanted stone with the power of immortality and unlimited gold?"

Hermione shook her head. "Well, to be fair, if we'd left it alone we'd never have gotten injured..."

Which may have been true, but Harry wasn't really feeling charitable toward Dumbledore at the moment, "We should have just ignored the fact that Voldemort was after an item with the power to convey eternal life? Because that sounds like a great idea!"

"Anyway," Ron continued in a louder voice, ignoring the two of them, "It's not like it hurt you, right? So it was safe. Technically. Maybe not smart, but safe. And I mean, I saw you performing some of the charms Flitwick assigned. How'd you do that?"

"It's not that I can't do the charms, it's just- I never had to actually think about using magic before - not after I got the first few spells down. I mean, making sure I had the spell right, or the correct wand movements, but other than that? Flick the wand, say the word, perform the magic. Now I have to actually think about what I'm doing. Force myself to work it the old way, to channel the magic through the wand, into the structure of the spell..." And not to sound like he was whining? But it'd used to be so simple compared to now.

"Well mate, maybe all you need is practice?"

And he wanted to embrace Ron's optimism, but it sounded just a little too easy - and nothing in his life had ever been easy for him, aside from magic. And now that too was gone too. "Practice? You think that's all?"

"No, he's right." Hermione nodded, "You just got so used to trying to do things without a wand - all you need is to get used to doing it with a wand again!"



He sighed, slumping. "Yeah, maybe you guys are right. But, what do I do until then? I don't want anyone to know about this."

Hermione and Ron exchanged glances. "Well," Hermione said, "You got through it without Flitwick realizing something was wrong. I'll do some research tonight, after detention..."

"That won't help me period after next."

Ron pulled the crumpled schedule from his pocket, studying it as he spoke. "Why? Who's after next per- Oh."

"Yeah." He said grimly. "Oh."

He gloomily contemplated the incoming pain. Flitwick's teaching style was anarchic and engaging, and he held his classes with a cheerful disorder. In the chaos, it was easy to deliberately slip between the cracks. McGonagall however...

McGonagall ran her classroom with the precision and sternness of a drill instructor. And had as much patience for disruptive students.

And transfiguration spells - converting, as they did, matter into other forms - tended to go spectacularly wrong when they went wrong.

He groaned into his hands. He was doomed. Unless...

He looked up as Ron spoke with a philosophical tone, "Well, you wanted to do detentions with us anyway. Uh, why are you looking at us like that?"

He grinned. He was saved. "I have an idea."

Hermione tilted her head, "An idea on how you'll make sure you don't disrupt the class?"

He smiled at them warmly - because he was saved! - and ignored how they edged back a few inches. "Well, that's where you two come in..."

-

Trying not to sneeze from the strong incense floating around the room - and contemplating the professor's unfortunate resemblance to a bug - Harry and his friends listened to Professor Trelawney's opening lecture.

He'd been looking forward to the divination lesson. Knowing he'd signed up for the class last year, several of his ordered summer books had covered the topic. In addition to the class textbook "Unfogging the Future" - which seemed more like a "how to" manual at times than an overview of the subject - he'd also read three others. Of them all, he'd only really enjoyed one: "Divination's Dividends: an Overview of its Opportunities and Limitations." The others had been kind of interesting, but also very confusing, and filled with conflicting and vague opinions, (sometimes within the book itself). If he hadn't ordered the Divination's Dividends book, he was sure he'd have been completely lost. Actually intended as an introductory textbook for adults, it did what Unfogging didn't: gave an overview of all forms of divination, dispelling rumors about what was and wasn't possible with it while also giving some sort of order - and underlying principles - to what even the author had admitted was a imprecise and varied art.

He was already planning to order away for the author's other book: "Forget the Future - the True Treasure of the Diviner's Discipline."

But the fact the Professor Trelawney was starting her class with trying to get them to scry something of the future - not even explaining the basics! - was filling him with a very bad feeling.

And... He glanced at Hermione's slowly narrowing eyes, and winced.

I don't think Hermione approves of Trelawney.

Then Neville tripped over his own feet, shattering a cup, blushing as Trelawney swooped in, and Harry sighed. I've not even looked into the tea leaves yet, but somehow I have a bad feeling about this. And then transfiguration is next.

His earlier feeling of doom was rapidly returning.

-

They were coming out of transfiguration and headed down to the Great Hall for dinner when Hermione spoke. "Guys, we need to have a Meeting."

They could both hear the capitals. Not just a study date, then.

Ron shook his head, "Can't be tonight - you and I both have detention till 10."

"We could try sneaking out after curfew...?" Harry half asked, half suggested, contemplating the merits of the plan.

Hermione shook her head, "No, it's not urgent. Stupid to get in trouble over it. But it should be soon - tomorrow night?"

He shrugged, "Sounds good to me. We should be able to slip away after dinner - everyone will assume you're either at detention again, or that we're studying."

She nodded. "Tomorrow then." Her voice was firm, but there was a touch of something in it...

He frowned, but didn't push. If Hermione said it could wait it probably could. Maybe she was still just angry at Trelawney's stunt earlier trying to predict his death. Not that he'd particularly enjoyed that

either, but it'd been worth it to watch Ron lose his cool at a professor - and get away with it. Apparently, predicting his best friend's death was a great way to get Ron pissed.

And they were almost to Gryffindor table anyway.

Dropping the topic, he sat and began filling his plate, starting with the mashed potatoes. Across the table from him, Fred grinned. "Enjoy divination, Harry?"

Wondering if the topic was already all over the school - given the way Hogwarts gossip worked, probable - he rolled his eyes and just focused on eating, leaving Ron or Hermione to answer. They both had detention tonight, and the three of them were planning on meeting tomorrow night, which meant he'd have all tonight to practice every wand spell he knew. If there was any truth to Ron's suggestion that all he needed to get back to normal was practice, he wanted to get it over with.

With both potions and defense on his schedule - plus whatever Hermione was worried about - he wanted to be back up to speed as soon as possible.

-

She didn't have a choice to make.

Twisting the fine gold links of the hourglass's chain through her fingers, dorm room silent around her, she rolled her eyes at how stupid that sounded, even to herself.

But it was true. She didn't have a choice to make. She'd already made her choice two nights ago, listening to Ron and Harry talk about killing someone, huddled together in a room filled with weapons of war.

She'd put conditions on it, of course. Reserved the right to tell them when they were being stupid, when they needed to revise their plans. But Harry had asked... and she'd said yes.

She felt again that flash of anger that had burned through her that he'd had to ask, and maybe Ginny's death had changed her more than she'd thought. Because she wasn't hurt that they doubted her, wasn't relieved that they'd given her a chance to back out. No, she wasn't any of those things. What she'd been was mad. Because they should have known. Because they shouldn't have needed to ask. Because, among other things, if she'd planned on ditching them, it would have been during the summer, when both of them were pretending that she didn't exist. The only reason she hadn't given up on them, that she'd kept writing, kept reaching out to them by mail instead of just waiting to smack them over the head when they met up come the new school year, was that her letters were never returned unopened. And that their owls kept coming back. Empty taloned, but still there. Waiting.

So yes, she'd made her choice. She made it first two years ago, when the two of them had come between her and a mountain troll, when they could have run away. Had made it again when sneaking out with them to a duel in an effort to keep them out of trouble, made it when she helped them plan how to smuggle a dragon. Made it when she'd followed Harry after the philosopher's stone, sneaking by a three-headed monster she recognized from her readings of Greek classical myths. She'd made it the next year, standing with them against parseltongue inspired rumours, and again, brewing polyjuice in a deserted bathroom to break school rules. Had made it when she gritted her teeth that summer and picked up a book on offensive and defensive magic, forcing herself to practice curses that could injure and incapacitate, when she'd never hurt anyone in her life.

It was, in the end, a choice she'd made not last night, but years ago, and made in all the years since, again and again, the same choice in a hundred different guises. It was a choice she wondered now if she

could ever not make.

She clenched her fingers, feeling smooth glass and cold metal between them, then relaxed. All of which didn't mean she never doubted. Never hesitated, never worried. A witch could be bound to her word, but magic had to be invoked to do it. And she wondered at the trust Professor McGonagall and Dumbledore had in her, to bestow such a priceless artefact when she was too young for such a working to be demanded. To only ask for her complete silence, no guarantee but her given word, no safeguard but her promise of secrecy.

She'd lied even as she'd sworn, looking at their grave faces. Lied because something in her had died a little, since she'd first woken in the hospital months ago, into a world where everything had changed. Something that had urged her to trust, and respect, and obey, to be good and quiet and follow the lead of adults. Something that had been broken, when she saw how the Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were going to let this go, how Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall were going to let this go. Were going to punish them for not doing the same.

She closed her eyes for a moment, and took a deep breath. Exhaled. Stood up, dropping the chain over her head, tucking the hourglass safely away under her robes. Gathered up her books, ready to head down to meet Harry and Ron for breakfast. She'd already made her choice.

And if Dumbledore and McGonagall would have preferred she make a different one, they should have done something years ago.

-

Every student at Hogwarts knew that the Defence Against the Dark Arts position was cursed. Few really thought about what that meant, other than having gotten used to a revolving door of professors as

they moved through their school years.

But Harry, Harry had chosen his summer reading last year with an eye toward what sounded both dangerous and interesting, and so, written on the order form under "Standard Book of Spells, Grade Three," (because really, he could see the pattern there already), and above "Beyond Propaganda: History as Written by the Losers," he'd carefully inked in his eighth request, "Malice in Magic - a Study of Curses Through the Ages."

The book he'd received was nothing like the dueling text he'd expected.

Which was probably a common occurrence, given the lengthy introduction he'd paged through, describing the etymology and evolution of the usage of the word "curse," changing through history until it had arrived at today's understanding of the word, where it was commonly used for a wide variety of harmful spells, either cast on a person or enchanted into an object.

The introduction had finished by informing the reader that those modern spells were not what this book was about, and if that was what they were looking for, here were a few books to look up. (Harry had noted down the names quickly, then continued reading.) What the book was about, the author had continued, were curses in the old sense of the word. Magic called down by blood or death or bitter grief, human will and human hate twisting wild magic with emotion, creating something that lived, not sentient but far more complex than a mere spell. Emotion and intent creating a hook that anchored itself in the power of the natural world, a true curse was both subtle and dangerous, pervasive and persistent, because it was no mere spell to be blocked, or object to be purified and destroyed. Old curses were malice embodied in magic - and it was a magic that could and would and did kill.

And defense practitioners, better than any other, would know the

danger of such.

Little wonder then, he'd realized, that Hogwart's defense classes had been staffed with fools for years.

So what, he thought, is Sebastian Aesalon doing here?

Harry studied their new DADA teacher carefully, screening his investigation behind lowered head, bent to quill and parchment. He'd already finished the test the professor had handed out at the beginning of the class ("Not graded," the man assured them, "just something to help judge where you're at.") And if his knowledge of the Dark Arts and ways to defend against them was still nothing to brag about, he knew solid satisfaction that he'd have done far worse had this test been administered at the end of his second year. Knew that his classmates, unless they'd been doing extracurricular studies too, had done far worse than he.

He'd thought about pretending he knew less than he did, for secrecy was one of the things the three of them had agreed was necessary, that night they arrived and slipped away from the welcome back party to talk privately about what they'd so desperately needed to settle. But of all the classes he could sabotage himself in, this one was the one he needed to get the most out of. So he'd answered all the questions he knew and did his best to guess intelligently at what he didn't - and vowed to be careful about revealing what he'd learn in the future, but not so careful that he didn't learn at all.

Besides, if his Boy-Who-Lived status could help anywhere, it was here. He hadn't missed that everyone had expected him to be good at magic when he'd arrived here, though how they could believe a muggle-raised eleven year old could excel at any magic, he'd never understood. It'd been part of the reason he'd hated his fame - knowing that they looked at him, judged him, whispered about him. Knowing what some of them thought, every time he fumbled a new spell. But it also meant they didn't look too closely when he



performed well at other ones. Once he'd figured out how to cast his first spells, he could beat Hermione in practicals if he did his homework. But he'd never earned Gryffindor half the points in those classes as she did.

He told himself he wasn't at all bitter about it.

But he'd use it. The less questions the better. And if people believed him excelling at Defence Against the Dark Arts was some natural Boy-Who-Lived gift, not a necessary preparation to taking out Lucius Malfoy... well. All the better. He didn't know why everyone had decided that letting Lucius Malfoy live after he'd - incited - Ginny's death was a good idea, but he was aware how they'd respond to Ron and his plans.

And this was too important to fail.

"Time's up." Said Aesalon from near his desk, and Harry lay down his quill and passed his test to the front, still contemplating the man standing before the class.

The professor was of medium height, dark haired and dark eyed. Slim and neat, clad in blue and black robes, he had no trace of Lockhart or Quirrel's separate flamboyances. Of course, given that both Lockhart and Quirrel had been living two - albeit very different - lies, maybe that was a good thing. Still, it seemed odd having a teacher so quietly self-contained. Snape's drama, Flitwick's exuberance, McGonagall's stern intimidation, even Dumbledore's maddening cheer- he was used to a certain flair in the professors of Hogwarts, and Aesalon seemed - so far - to be entirely too ordinary.

Papers collected, the professor moved to the centre. "We still have twenty minutes left, and so we'll be talking a bit. I'm sorry to have forced a test on you on your first day, but the previous defence teachers didn't seem to leave behind very complete notes on what they covered, if they left behind notes at all. I already have various

lesson plans drawn up, and the test will let me know where to start with you. But it's never too early to begin learning, so - any questions about things asked in the test?"

Harry only shook his head, smiling, as Hermione's hand shot into the air. Ron rolled his eyes.

"Professor Aesalon, one of the questions asked what the difference between a defence ward and a defence protection was. I thought they were the same?"

The following discussion was surprisingly lively and engaging, skipping from topic to topic as more students brought up various questions that had intrigued them. The twenty minutes passed far more quickly than any defence lesson he could recall from before, and when the Professor at last wrapped it up, he actually found himself rising with a feeling of excitement. Cautious excitement, but excitement.

Maybe this year they'd actually learn from their defence professor.

Not that he planned on being anywhere near the man without a wand and possibly Ron or Hermione to guard his back.

-

The first potions lesson of the year was as unpleasant as he'd expected. Snape had been in his best form, mocking students' character, abilities, future potential, breeding, and general competence. A great deal of it directed at the last Potter scion. Harry gritted his teeth through it, forcing himself to calm. Learning to wield magic without his wand had taken ferocious willpower, and ruthless control over his emotions - Snapewould not make him fail that control.

He repeated that to himself - twice - before he calmly looked up to

answer the professor's question - the fifth asked of him that lesson.

"During the new moon, Professor."

Snape's eyes narrowed and he sneered, contempt glittering. Fed up with this - with Snape being in a bad mood because Harry wasn't screwing up - he refused to avert his own eyes as he had the previous four times before.

He didn't know how long the stare down would have lasted. Snape drew himself up, looking about to say something cutting and probably point taking, but behind him a potion began to boil over, and he spun away to attend to the frothing green bubbles beginning to spill down onto the floor.

Harry sighed and turned his attention back to his own potion, glowing a bright lime green. God, he wanted this lesson over with. He gave the cauldron's contents a quick double stir clockwise, then once counter-clockwise. Cast a spell to alert him when two minutes had passed, then sat back, waiting.

Movement from the corner of his eye grabbed his attention, and his hand shot out, snapping closed around a bundle of orange-leafed plants before it landed in his caldron. Followed the trajectory back, where Draco Malfoy was scowling at him. Raised an eyebrow as he sniffed, pulling back at the pungently spicy odor characteristic of fire bloom.

Adding that would have created an explosion that would have put Neville's usual contrempts to shame. It might even have sent Harry to the hospital wing. Again.

He briefly contemplated sending it back, but while he had a seeker's reflexes, he unfortunately didn't have a chaser's arm. Besides, he knew who Snape would believe in the ensuring argument.

So he smiled at Malfoy and mouthed a "thank you" at the infuriated boy, dropping it into his potions kit with a mocking smile.

Fire bloom was extremely difficult to acquire, after all, its most common usage in several borderline illegal potions. There was no reason to waste potential resources.

-

The next night they flopped down on familiar cushions in the back corner of the armory, and Harry watched Hermione eagerly, a day and a half's worth of curiosity about to be satisfied at last.

"Alright, Hermione," Ron said as she organized papers from her satchel, one of his hands searching through his bag blindly, pulling out a bottle of Bertie Bott's Every Flavored Bean even as he kept his eyes on his friend. "What's up?"

She took a deep breath and took something from under her robes, then reached up and pulled it over her head. Away from her, they could see it was a necklace. One they'd somehow not noticed - despite the fact that, in the two years they'd known her, they'd never seen Hermione wearing jewelry - until it was in her hand.

Interesting.

She reached out and placed it on the table in front of them, and he could see it clearly for the first time. A small gold hourglass glinted in the light, the sand at rest in the bottom half of the glass. "This," she said, "is a time turner."

And just the name suggested so many possibilities.

"It's the reason Professor McGonagall asked me to stay behind in the Headmaster's office," she continued. "I've been careful not to pull out my class timetable in front of you guys, but. Well, here." And she

scooted it across the table at them.

He picked it up and felt Ron leaning in towards him, so he tilted the paper to allow him to see even as he read it over. At first glance, it didn't look much different than his own, but-

"Hermione?" Ron's voice was an odd combination of resigned and curious, like he had to ask, but wasn't sure if he really wanted to know, "Why does it say you're scheduled for Ancient Runes, Muggle Studies, and Arithmancy at the same time?"

And their studious friend - blushed.

"They just all sounded so interesting! I couldn't choose just two. So I asked Professor McGonagall if there was a way for me to take more classes, and she said she'd have to think about it over the summer, and there might be, because I was such a responsible student. And I thought I'd end up with private study, maybe. Or taking classes with another house, because I was sure the scheduling would be kind of odd. And I've done both those before in primary school, but then she kept me after she told you guys to go to Herbology, and she and the Headmaster gave me this."

It was said with only a few pauses to breathe. Harry was impressed.

"Hermione," Ron said, apparently able to put aside the mind-boggling implications of having multiple courses scheduled for the same hour - and being given an object named a time turner to deal with this contradiction - for the even more mind boggling craziness of trying to take every course Hogwarts offered. At the same time. "You're muggleborn. Why are you taking muggle studies?"

"Because I want to see how wizards perceive us! It'll be a fascinating insight into wizarding society."

Of course.

He watched Ron drop his head onto the table, muttering something he could only vaguely make out, with words in there like 'crazy' and 'should have known.' And smirked.

Because yes, it was crazy. And so incredibly Hermione that really? They should have expected this.

"I assume," he spoke, because Ron had given up trying to induce self-amnesia via table-force trauma, and was now doing a good impression of trying to instead self-medicate into that state via Bott's jellybeans, "that time turners can, well, turn back time?"

She grinned, eager and smug, eyes alight with possibilities. "Exactly."

And he had to smile back, just a bit ferally, because, because this had so much potential.

He reached out and picked up the necklace, glinting gold in the light, such a tiny thing to hold power over time itself, and grinned. "So. How can we use this?"

-

Lumos charm providing light, Hermione closed the book she'd been reading and dropped it besides her on her bed, thoughtful.

She hadn't had as much time to research wandless magic as she would have liked - and had been forced to use her time-turner last night after detention to squeeze the second book in as it was - but if two books were hardly a complete research list, at least they'd been thorough and relatively simple ones. And from her initial foray into the library, there actually weren't many books dedicated to the subject.

The thing about wandless magic was that it was a parlor trick, really.

Oh, it had a certain mystery to it - and many wizards who couldn't so much as summon a spark without a wand might be impressed at the lighting of a candle by a wave of one's hands - but from the tone of the authors of the books, savvy wizards and witches knew better. A powerful wizard with wandless magic could do some - very very basic - things a wizard with a wand could do, but no wizard - no matter how powerful - could ever achieve wandlessly things that a wizard with a wand couldn't do.

Wandless magic, then, the books continued, was nothing more than a sub-optimal tool in a wizard or witch's potential arsenal. The ability, when one came right down to it, was only useful if one had lost their wand.

And a wizard or witch who would lose their wand... well, then it didn't matter how strong they were in raw power. At that point, victory or escape relied on his or her opponent screwing up. Far better for the intelligent wizard to win victory through practice and knowledge turned to talented dueling, rather than spend months of time on a skill that relied on an opponent's idiocy.

It was a conclusion that made sense, but still... she frowned. The book had mentioned how a trained wizard might spend years learning to do even the simplest of things on demand. And Harry had spent months on it, yes. But not years. And she had a sneaking suspicion why.

Wizards don't usually make serious attempts at learning magic without a wand till they're fully trained. It's a curiosity, something to explore or play with after they graduate. After they've had seven years of nothing but wandless magic. And Harry said that trying to do it was completely different from trying wandless magic - different enough that it messed with his control when he tried the old way. Maybe switching back and forth from wandless to wandless would have kept him from having problems with wandless magic... but I can't imagine it would have been good for his speed at learning wandless magic.

From what Harry had said, it'd been two months of practicing every night before he really learned how to use his magic at will - two months of teaching his magic to function in an entirely different way than it had previously. Two months without wand magic muddying the effort. She tried to imagine an adult wizard going two months - probably double or triple that, if not more, given that they had more than triple the amount of training in wand magic that Harry had - without using magic once... Shook her head. No way. Wizards use magic for their jobs, for travel. To cook their food and clean their clothes, to play their games and weed their gardens and call their friends. An adult wizard giving up magic for a year just to learn how to levitate a feather or light a candle?

Only a kid would do it, really. A kid forbidden from practicing wand magic anyway. Oh, there probably were wizards out there who would be willing to go without magic for months or years, if the prize at the end was great enough. But for the ability to do a weak version of first year spells?

She shook her head again, marveling. No wonder wandless magic is rare.

No wonder it was written off as a curiosity of little import. Centuries of wizarding experience told everyone who looked into the subject that it involved great sacrifice for virtually no reward. And the ambitious usually invested their efforts in more time effective pursuits.

Not worth the effort, was the general conclusion.

So experienced wisdom held. And so, of course, Harry Potter was determined to ignore them all and master it.

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Chapter End



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Notes:

\* This was all written a month ago except for one 800 word scene. That was incredibly frustrating.

\* Also, having reread Deadly Hollows, is anyone else amused by a story and a war - seven books long! - that ends without anything actually being resolved? Blood prejudice is still there. Bias against magical creatures is still there (and likely to get worse, given some creatures' involvement on the side of Voldemort.) Even an inefficient schooling system (hello, Trelawney, Binns) is still there. And as far as we know, a corrupt ministry and judicial system is still there too. It's like Harry spent seven books fighting a war that, in the end, accomplished absolutely nothing. Except for the lives he saved killing Voldemort, of course. But he'll probably be ticked when he has to do it all again in twenty/forty years. Or move to Majorca.

I'm not sure if I admire the realism, or find it incredibly frustrating. Probably both.

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Next Chapter:

"You're not even half way through your schooling, Mr. Potter, I'm going to be your defense professor for a long time. You don't think you'll ever learn to trust me?"

Harry looked back to where Aesalon stood besides his desk, and he thought about what to say. Thought about saying, I faced both my previous defense professors at wand point, and was forced to kill one and hospitalize the other. Or, I don't trust Professor McGonagall or Professor Dumbledore, and they have a two year head start on you.

Or even, Answer any questions I have, teach me anything I ask, and I'll consider it.

But all of those responses revealed far too much about himself to be safe.

So he met Aesalon's eyes steadily, and said instead, "I don't think you'll still be here next year."

Then he turned, and slipped out the door.

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## Chapter Seven: Crafting the Pommel

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He tilted his head to the left and frowned. Tilted it back right. Brushed a lock of hair back from his eyes and squinted. Frowned again. Tilted. "Oh for God's sake, Ron, what the hell do you see?"

He looked up at that impatient comment, meeting his best friend's exasperated stare. "Mate, I've no bloody idea."

Across from him, Harry raised an eyebrow and reached to pull the tea saucer from his unresisting hands. "Not like you. Granted, some of the shapes you've come up with aren't in the textboo-" Stopped. Blinked. Looked back up at him. "Ron, how much tea did you use?"

He sighed, recalling the single pile of sludgy tea leaves clogging the bottom of the saucer. "Too much, I reckon."

Harry snorted, and pushed away the crockery in disgust. "Unless it's predicting your coming death by a sludge monster, Trelawney won't be interested."

Surprised, he stared at Harry.

"What?" the younger boy asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing." And it probably wasn't, but...

I've never heard Harry use that tone of voice before. It had been... contemptuous. And Harry didn't do contempt.

Anger, mockery, and sarcasm, yes. Frustration, frequently. Condescension occasionally, though Hermione tended to have a monopoly on that. Disgust even, sparingly, and mostly in regards to the Slytherins. Who deserved it. But contempt, much less contempt

towards a teacher...

I know he's unhappy with McGonagall. And Dumbledore. And hell, we all loathe the greasy git. And Trelawney's about as genuine as a leprechaun's gold, but if anyone was going to be upset about it, I'd have bet a galleon that it would be Hermione.

So why was Harry so... so...

So something.

He's acting like Trelawney's actually wronged him, he realized. And I still can't believe the barmy old bat had the gall to predict his death Monday, but he acted more amused and long suffering than anything else, especially after McGonagall confirmed it was a lie. Not happy, but not this... complete and utter dismissal. Like he's starting to discount everything Trelawney says.

And it wasn't like he had a great deal of faith in their divination professor from what he'd seen so far, but she had to have been hired for a reason, right?

A quiet, scraping noise had him turning his head, distracted from his thoughts, and he goggled as he watched Hermione drag her low, overstuffed chair across the two foot gap between their table and the one she'd been sharing with Lavender. Any other classroom and the professor would have pounced; with Trelawney, there was a fair chance she wouldn't even notice, especially given the tiny 'aisles' and over-crowded feeling of the room.

It's a damn good thing I'm not claustrophobic. And what is she doing?

"She's a fraud!" Hermione announced her arrival with the outraged hiss, dropping her book on their table.

Ah.

Harry rolled his eyes without looking up at them from his study of Unfogging the Future. "Tell us something we don't know, Hermione."

"A morbid fraud!"

"Still with the already knowing."

"Harry!"

At his name, Harry finally looked up. "What?"

She stared at their black haired friend. "Is that all you have to say?"

Harry looked around; by long habit he followed suit, at last locating Trelawney in the far corner of the classroom, standing over a vaguely terrified looking Neville and a starry-eyed Pavarti. Assured of their apparent safety, Harry turned back to them and closed his copy of the textbook, then shrugged. "Look, I'm trying not to judge too harshly - this is only our first week with her - but yeah, right now? It looks like Divination's going to suck."

Hermione looked heartbroken. "But I was so looking forward to this class!" "Hermione," he said, speaking up since Harry didn't seem to know what to say to this, "You look forward to every class." Even history of magic, for Merlin's sake. And that's got to be a feat of magic right there...

"Well, yes. But all my other new classes have been so much better than this!"

"So one bad class with a slightly barmy professor shouldn't be too much to endure, right?"

She slumped. "Maybe it'll get better as we learn more advanced stuff."

He met Harry's eyes. Harry shrugged. He looked back at Hermione, who was staring beyond them at Trelawney, frowning in contemplation. "Yeah." He finally said. "Maybe."

But from the look on his friend's face, Harry didn't believe that any more than he did.

-

The second transfiguration lesson of the year wasn't going well.

He'd been able to get Hermione and Ron to cover for him Monday, and one of them would be turning this pillow into a teacup for him - assuming one of them got the spell before the end of the class - as a failsafe today if he couldn't, but even if it'd save him from McGonagall's notice, that really wasn't what he wanted to happen. What he wanted was to be able to do his own bloody transfigurations himself.

Right now, he thought grimly, it's not looking good.

It was even worse than charms class. And charms class had been bad enough.

He was quickly learning that, when you were completely and utterly failing at things you could do effortlessly last year, class could really, really suck.

It probably didn't help that he refused to show any weakness to Professor McGonagall. It made him wary of experimenting too wildly while still in the classroom, afraid of explosions or other side effects. But his traditional way of casting transfiguration spells (pointing his wand at the object and carefully enunciating) wasn't working.

Not that he'd ever been the most talented student of their year when

it came to transfiguration. Most of the time, his first attempts would leave remnants going from one object to another - a box that retained its floral patterned button antecedents, a cup that looked like silver but still retained the feel of wood - but at least there'd still been some changes. Some signs that, yes, he actually was getting closer. It might take him a dozen tries before he'd be comfortable with a spell, but eventually he'd get there, gradual progress or no.

He glared down at the innocent looking pillow in front of him. Hell, I'm not even getting it to change texture.

And he couldn't even understand why.

With charms, it'd been frustrating and concentration demanding, but he'd at least had an idea of what was going wrong. He was learning to direct his magic through a wand again, and was forced to be extremely careful of how much magic he fed into the spell (and that still felt weird, really weird, because before the summer he'd never even noticed being able to feel his magic like that during spell casting) but all that had been, well, not easy, but still understandable.

With transfiguration, it was like he was missing part of the spell. Which was ridiculous, because he had the swish down, and his pronunciation was bloody perfect, and he was making sure to use his wand...

Besides him, Hermione's pillow blurred, then slowly morphed into a simple teacup, slightly lopsided but entirely serviceable. She made a sound of delight, then glanced at him and bit her lip, looking guilty.

Ah, hell. He forced himself to smile at her, and his heart lightened when she smiled back, relieved. It's not her fault I screwed myself up. And she hasn't lectured me about it at all - which had to be a strain. But I'm kicking myself enough for this.

Not that he was sure he would have made a different choice, even

knowing then what he did now.

Talking to Ron... it was important. And I didn't know at the time what Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had said to him about me. If they'd... blamed me, I didn't want to find out in the middle of Platform 9 and 3/4. And if they hadn't told Ron the whole story... he deserved to know.

No, he couldn't regret it. Not yet. But if he didn't figure out how to fix himself soon, he might start.

-

Care of Magical Creatures was in a classroom on the second floor. None of the three of them had ever been in it before, but Hermione had announced it was close to her Ancient Runes class, and led the way with some confidence.

The teacher... was not what he'd been expecting.

The man looked like he'd been through a war. Or several. Gray hair cut short revealed that the top part of his left ear appeared to have been sliced away at some point, and his right hand was missing two fingers. Something in the way he stood seemed off, too, like he had some kind of old injury hidden beneath the robes. Besides him, Ron was staring at the battered, scared visage in a mixture of awe and horror. He had a feeling his own expression wasn't that far behind.

"I'm Professor Kettleburn," the professor's voice was tough and no-nonsense, his gruff Scottish accent seeming to lend gravity to his words, "and welcome to Care of Magical Creatures. Due to recent events, I don't think I need to emphasize to any of you, the importance of this class."

Around the room, students exchanged glances. He frowned. Is he talking about...? "I was scheduled to retire at the end of last year," the professor continued on, "and I was all set to do it. Kind of looking



forward to it, to tell you the truth. I've spent the last thirteen years trying to drill the basics of magical animal care into teenagers, and I was entirely ready to retire someplace warm and sandy, and children free. At least, I was until the tragic events at the end of the last school term." Harry set his jaw. He is. "It reminded me of the importance of teaching you budding young sources of chaos the dangers - and more than ever now, reminding you of the joys - to be found in magical creatures."

He looked at Ron, worried. The red head was grim, his fists clenched, but that was the only outward sign of distress.

"So, on to the format of this class. You were probably surprised to see your first class with me wasn't til Thursday, and I'm equally sure you noticed Care of Magical Creatures is the only class that meets on a Saturday. The reason for both of these things is simple: I believe that the best way to get familiar with a wide variety of magical creatures, is hands on experience."

Neville went sheet-white. Lavender squeaked. Several other students in the class looked pale. The professor frowned. "What's the matter with all of you?"

Pavarti raised her hand, "Er, professor, you're not actually going to make us meet a Basilisk...?"

Kettleburn stared at them. "Where on Earth did you get a maggoty-brained idea like that?"

"Well, you were talking about Basilisks, and then hands on experience..."

"Hah!" The professor laughed. "What do you think this is, Defense Against the Dark Arts? We're learning care of magical creatures, not how to kill them. Unless any of you are planning on becoming magical creature breeders... and I think in that case I should warn

you that Basilisk breeding is prohibited by the Ministry."

Hermione raised her hand. "Then what type of magical creatures are we learning about?"

"Not a bad question, Ms. Granger, and the answer is: for your first year, non-dangerous ones. Unicorns, salamanders, bowtruckles, kneezles and the like. Next year we move on to more advanced creatures," Kettleburn continued, "and if you decide to take Care of Magical Creatures at a NEWT level, then yes, we will be covering the potentially lethal kind, like Dragons and Griffins."

Hermione's hand shot up again, "Why would we learn about Dragons and Griffins, but not Basilisks?" Harry raised an eyebrow. That was actually a good question

The professor sighed, "Care of magical creatures is a basic class for a whole host of future careers, from simple things like pet shop owner or a department of magical creatures officer, to more exotic fields like potions ingredient gatherer or dragon-keeper. The point of care of magical creatures is not to teach you how to kill them, but to teach you how to keep them alive. You will be learning things like habitat, lifecycles, diet, mating habits, grooming, potential uses, and common problems encountered with magical creatures. Basilisks - rare snakes created by dark magic - have neither marketable ingredients nor do they make good pets. Now, no more questions please."

Looking sheepish, Hermione lowered her hand. Harry hid a grin.

"As I was saying, we have this two day format for a reason. Each Thursday I will be introducing you to the magical creature we are studying for the week, and assign you whatever reading is required. On Saturday - when at all possible - you will be meeting a live specimen of said creature. For now, that will mostly happen here on Hogwarts grounds. In later years, that might include fieldtrips; I've

always found the seventh year's daytrip to the Romanian dragon preserve goes over very well." He smiled at the whispers that broke out. "Exactly. And with that taken care of, I think it time to introduce you to the first of our animals - the ashwinder snake."

Harry leaned forward as the professor drew a pattern in the air with his wand. Glowing fire hung in the air behind it - he flinched, forcibly shoving down memories of when he'd last seen that trick - then slowly a thin, gray snake with glowing red eyes solidified from it.

"Ashwinder's," Kettleburn began in a lecturing tone, "are not really dangerous on their own. They are born of magical fires, and live only long enough to lay eggs in some dark and secluded spot. These eggs, while valued as potion ingredients, are very dangerous..."

Students scrambled at quills as he began the lesson. Picking up his own, Harry pushed aside the last unsettled memories brought on by the professor's lecture. I wish he hadn't mentioned Ginny, he thought, glancing at Ron, and I wish the first creature we're learning about isn't a snake. But at least it looks like this will be an interesting class. And Professor Kettleburn is certainly no Trelawney.

Still... if he's not all about killing dangerous magical creatures, how'd he end up so battered?

-

Lunch had been subdued for the three of them. Ron ate his food with a studied concentration, and he mostly just toyed with his own, not feeling very hungry. Hermione had clearly been filled with excitement about the care of magical creatures class they'd just had, but had clamped down on her energy in deference to their own more subdued mood.

He was glad they had history of magic after lunch. It was one class that could be counted on to always be tame.

They'd ended up leaving for it early, and Harry found himself as one of the first students to arrive. Slowly, other students trickled in, then Binns floated in and began his lecture.

It'd been a while since Harry really bothered to pay attention in history of magic. He certainly hadn't Tuesday, the first lecture they'd had this year. His mind had been far too occupied with other things: freaking out about his magic, stewing over professor McGonagall, wondering what Hermione had to share with them. But today he was, well, still freaking out over his magic, if not as much, but he knew about the time turner, now, and he'd decided he didn't care about McGonagall.

So when Binns started talking, he actually tried paying attention. Tried being the operative word. Binns is still the most boring professor ever. And how can he make something that was so interesting when I was reading it in the books seem so incredibly dull now?

The thing was, some of the stuff they'd studied in History of Magic was actually kind of interesting, on the surface. They'd been moving forward steadily through time as the years progressed, first years learning the basics of everything up til the founding of Hogwarts, then in second year they'd covered through the 1300's, and the founding years of the Wizard's Council. One of the items of summer homework had been discussing the topic of witch burning in the fourteenth century - a topic with the potential to make a fascinating debate, if Binns had ever held debates - and they were scheduled to start the 1400's this year.

It could all be fascinating, like a fairy-tale story, if only he taught it differently. Instead he just floats up there the entire class, reading from his notes, with about as much enthusiasm and vocal expression as a non-animated stone wall.

Sometimes, Harry suspected that Binns didn't even like teaching. Which seemed really twisted considering he was still doing it even after he died. When the ghost coupled that uncaring attitude towards students with his absolute loathing of anything that couldn't be taken as proven, historical fact... No stories of daring adventures. No accounts of battlefields, or intrigue or scandal. Just... facts. Half the time, facts on various government bodies, because no one seems to record the minutia type details of life like they do.

He sighed and rested his chin on his hand, tapping his pen against his history book as he thought. For that matter, the class might be called 'history of magic' but really, it isn't. It's more like 'history of magical Britain in the last two thousand years - with a few side-trips into the rest of Europe, and a focus on the government's development.'

Well, it was true that 'History of Magic' was a shorter title...

Wait. He looked up, tuning in to Binns' lecture long enough to realize he was discussing the committees the witch burnings had inspired in the young Ministry of Magic at the time. History of the magical government. That's... that's what we need to know.

The majority of the information would in all probability be useless for their purposes. Most of it would be out of date. But it'd start to give him an idea of what laws there were, and, most importantly, the story behind them.

He scanned the classroom, noting the glazed eyes of virtually every slouching student - not even Hermione seemed completely immune, though she soldiered along gamely. Most of them had long ago learned that simply doing the required reading from their textbooks was enough for a passing grade - and a great deal less agonizing than listening to Binns' drone.

This is going to be boring. And annoying. And probably frustrating,

because there's so many more interesting things to learn about than the Ministry of Magic and the various ways its expressed or abused its authority throughout the centuries. But maybe... maybe it's a good place to start.

He bit his lip and opened his notebook, flipping to an empty page and scribbling the date and topic in the upper right-hand corner. I told the Sorting Hat I was willing to work, even when the work was boring, or seemed to go nowhere. I told Hermione the same. And I told Ron I would help with bringing Lucius Malfoy down, no matter how long it took to get him convicted by the Ministry. I promised all of them... and I promised myself.

And Gryffindors keep their promises.

He dipped his quill in the ink and started taking notes.

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"I reviewed your tests Wednesday," Professor Aesalon announced, "but it's still going to be a few days before I'm ready with a finalized lesson plan for this year. I'm afraid a day and a half wasn't quite enough time, especially not when I'm evaluating six different years. Which means today's class is going to be a little unorthodox."

Unorthodox? He tilted his head, watching the professor. This sounds interesting.

"Now, we can't actually commence with a full scale lesson, but I'll take this opportunity to give you an overview of what I hope we will accomplish this year. To begin with, do any of you know what third years are expected to have knowledge of by the end of the year?"

Harry glanced around but no one looked like they had a clue, not even Hermione.

"Ah, not surprising. You were likely never told - indeed, the vast majority of wizards and witches are never explicitly told - that Hogwarts has a standard curriculum, established along guidelines developed in concert between the Ministry of Magic and the Board of Governors. The professors here at the school are welcome to teach more than these established basics, but by the end of the year, certain minimum standards of proficiency are expected. Graduating into fourth year, for example, you will be expected to be able to identify, contain, defeat, or escape from, most dangerous magical creatures and plants that fall in the class Three-X to class Four-X categories on the Ministry's classification scale. Understandably, they put a particular emphasis on those native to Europe. You'll be given an overview of the category Five-X creatures near year end, enough to at least recognize them, hopefully, but since the prescribed response to them is apperating away very fast, you won't be called upon to demonstrate." There were a few hisses of quiet laughter at the professor's wry tone. The man smiled and continued.

"It is not a coincidence," Aesalon admitted, "that you are to learn this in your third year of defense. Second year should have been teaching you basic survival skills, basic orienteering, and how to handle category Two-X to a few, low danger, category Three-X rated magical animals and plants. This would have given you a good grounding for the more dangerous creatures we are to be studying this year, and would also have been a felicitous introduction for those of you who elected to take Care of Magical Creatures among your optional courses of study. Unfortunately, from the answers I've been evaluating on the submitted tests, I've been forced to conclude your last year's defense professor was of woefully inadequate standards. Which necessitates attempts to remedy these holes in your education, and these remedial lessons will be interspersed in between your normal third year lessons as we are able."

So Lockhart wasn't being a total idiot with the pixies? he mused, surprised. Well, he'd been a total idiot, but he'd been an idiot at least trying to do his job right. Too bad he was also a spineless coward, a

traitor, and a thief. If he'd been worth anything, maybe Ginny wouldn't have died...

Shaking the thought away, he turned his attention back to their teacher.

"First year, in case any of you are curious, covers basic magical theory, a few almost harmless hexes and jinxes - such as jelly legs, or minor petrification - their counters, and various methods of summoning aid, such as the conjuration of sparks. At one time it was hoped to teach first years a basic illusion spell, but they've never found a spell of sufficient simplicity as to be within the capability of the majority of first year students. Now, does anyone know, or have a reasoned opinion, why those spells are the standard skill set taught first years?"

To Harry's surprise, it was Draco Malfoy, of all people, who raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy."

"Those are all you need to escape muggles, sir. And non-magical wild animals too, I guess."

"Correct, Mr. Malfoy; three points to Slytherin." The man looked out over the surprised class. "Indeed, although a jelly-legs jinx would do little against another wizard, it is fully capable of incapacitating a muggle, or even a boar. By the standards laid down at the founding of the school, by the end of their first year any children sent back to their homes over the summer should be able to protect themselves from a single muggle attacker, or summon aid if there should be a need. It's a tradition continued to this day, although we have, if possible, even less interaction with the muggle world than our ancestors did centuries ago. You had a question, Mr. Zabini?"

"Professor sir, how do you know all this? I don't think either of our



previous two defense professors did."

Aesalon smiled. "You might be selling them short, but in any case, I am unlikely to fit the archetype of a defense professor that your previous instructors - in all likelihood - embraced. In fact, by both training and inclination, I'm a historian."

Harry stared. The best defense professor it seems like we've had so far... and he's not a defense professor?

"That doesn't mean I'm useless at spells," their professor continued, "and I like to think my repertoire is at least respectable. But indeed, I've never won a dueling championship in my life. And my travels have mostly been supplementing my historical inquiry, not journeying about defeating various magical dangers. Which means your education will not just be in various curses and counter-curses, but rather I hope to instill in you some awareness of the world, and the present dangers therein.

"Now, unless someone has questions, I think it time to begin your practical lesson. Today we leave off investigating magical creatures or plants, and I will instead be teaching you three spells you should have covered in basic survival skills last year. We'll start with the charm to tell if water you run across in the wild is potable, then move on to a warming charm, designed to keep oneself from freezing if lost outdoors overnight. Finally, we'll cover the compass spell, supremely useful if you're not sure exactly where you are, but know a large settlement lies nearby, somewhere, say, to the north east. Please bring your wands to hand."

Surprised, Harry pulled his wand from his pocket. He wasn't sure if he ever would have any need for this in real life, but it wasn't often they had a defense lesson where their teacher was actually casting spells.

I think... I think I might like this guy.

But he's a historian. And since he chose this year to become a professor, chances are it was something that happened recently here that convinced him to teach. I can only think of one news worthy event at Hogwarts last year.

So he's either here about the Chamber of Secrets... or he's here about Ginny.

And either way... either way, I was involved.

-

He sighed, luxuriating in the feeling of having no deadlines, having nowhere to go, and having nothing to do now that it was past three in the afternoon, and his essays were finished. Smiling, he remembered Hermione's firm declaration yesterday, that they would not be time turning on Sunday.

Lazily, he moved his pawn forward on Ron's chessboard, not even wincing as Ron's knight promptly massacred it, and had to admit Hermione had probably had the right of it.

Not that either Ron or I fought too hard...

He'd made a few protests, not exactly token, but more out of the feeling that he should be working his hardest every single day than from anything else. They'd only had a few days use of the time turner, but he was already learning how tiring it could be.

And he could still remember Hermione's response. We need some down time, she'd argued. Human brains aren't meant to handle non-stop learning. When Ron had looked like he might protest, she'd shaken her head, adamant. We'll study in the morning, then take a break and be social in the afternoon. Remember - we're not just

going to have to do this for a few days. We're planning to use the time turner indefinitely.

Both good points.

The first week of the term had been far more busy than he could have imagined it would be, and it felt like he'd packed a month into a single six day period. Meeting the new professors, planning things out with Ron and Hermione, trying to get his magic working again, and dealing with the after-effects from the fight with Draco Malfoy...

When he wasn't in class he was studying, when he wasn't studying he was practicing wandless magic, and when he wasn't practicing he was talking with Ron and Hermione.

Hermione's right, he thought again, leaning back against the cushions, stretching as he enjoyed the way the sun poured in, languid and dreamy, from the windows set against the common room's wall. One day off a week isn't a bad thing.

Because if there was one thing he knew for sure, it was that, as busy as the first week of the term had been, the next few were going to be interesting.

-

It took a month of pounding his head against the wall before he got it, and by then he'd begun to get more than a little desperate. He shuddered now to think how long it might have taken, if he hadn't happened to have been absently staring at Professor Flitwick earlier in the morning as he passed out the materials they'd be needing for the day's charms class.

Well, he reflected, I say 'passed out' like he did it by hand, but he did it by magic. He usually does.

He'd watched the familiar show without interest, slouched down in his seat as the small, silver bells had floated out into the classroom, idly wondering, as they set themselves neatly down in front of each row of students, what they'd be learning that day. It'd actually taken him a moment to realize what he'd seen, and when he did it sent him bolting upright, astonished. He'd recognized those wand movements. The professor hadn't actually said anything out loud, (and how did professors do that, anyway?) but that familiar swish, with that little, characteristic flick at the end... the levitation spell had been the first spell Professor Flitwick ever taught them, and he sometimes thought the wand movements had been burned into his brain.

He remembered still, with a hint of discomfort, the way he'd stared at the professor hours earlier, confused, because that had been the levitation spell... but those bells had done far more than just float.

They'd floated, but they'd floated to each row. And yeah, he was used to the professors being able to do tons of things he couldn't, but he'd kind of always assumed they were using advanced spells - spells they'd be teaching the students in fifth or sixth or seventh year - to do it.

He'd only paid half attention to the lesson on altering the sound the bell would create when struck, (which he'd probably be regretting a little when he worked on the homework assignment tonight), because the other half of his mind had been busy wondering how the professor had done that.

Luckily, Flitwick was one of those professors with a true love of knowledge - appropriate, given his house - and a genuine joy in passing that knowledge along. He'd headed up to his diminutive professor at the end of the class, intent on getting answers. What those answers had suggested to him...

He stared down at the (familiar) pillow-nemesis sitting in front of him.

It's actually very simple, the professor's voice seemed to echo in his memory. The levitation spell, at its most basic, does cause things to float, but even while you were practicing it in your first year, surely you noticed you had some control over it? That you could chose how high the feather soared, or how long it did so, based on what you were thinking of when you cast it? The simple charms you learn in your early years at Hogwarts might be nowhere near as dependent on focus, intent, or visualization as even basic transfiguration requires, but I dare say one can't claim to have mastered a charm, til they've gotten beyond the basics. In fact, it'd be a good exercise for you; try sometime to make an object not just float, but dance.

Sneaking away at lunch, he'd tried it. In a way it'd felt strange, since most of the levitation he'd tried recently had been done wandlessly, but it was true that, wandlessly, he could do a great deal more with a feather - or a branch, or a book or any similar object- than to just make it float in mid air. And since things were always easier with a wand than without it... well, what could it hurt?

It'd been both oddly similar and dissimilar to his wandless exercises, and it'd taken a bit of practice, but he'd done it. And now...

Focus. Intent. Visualization.

He lifted his wand and closed his eyes, focusing himself as he would before he'd attempt wandless magic, working from that quiet, balanced stillness he'd found most facilitated his control. He took his time, painting the image vividly across his mind, crafting the desired form, piece by piece. He filled in details, sharpened the edges, forced himself to see it, til every inch and curve and detail was crystal clear, like a portrait etched into his brain-

Took a deep breath, and holding it, murmured the words of the inanimate to inanimate transfiguration spell.

Then he opened his eyes, and stared.

He'd never particularly thought of himself as gifted with transfiguration before, but the cup from his mind sat glittering before him, no mere lopsided teacup but a finely etched goblet, elaborate in its details and brilliant in its colors, with sinuous knot work along the edges, sparkling silver and looking exactly like he'd imagined it.

He looked on in wonder at the delicate, perfectly balanced cup sitting before him, remembering how clear it'd all felt; the feel of magic touching and learning the pillow, then the twist of the spell as it reached for his input and his will triggered the shift, whirling atoms into the new form he held in his mind, following the pattern he imposed on the magic as if it'd been drawn in ink and parchment, rather than painted as an image in his head...

It'd been like, like feeling the click of a last puzzle piece finding home. Like diving faster than freefall, knowing the snitch was ahead of him, one twist to the right away. Like that last breathless moment with wandless magic, right as pure concentration shifted into action, and everything in the universe went right.

It'd been perfect. And aside from the extra focus he'd been forced to use, holding the visualization and delicately spinning out only so much magic as to fill the pattern and no more...

Aside from the extra concentration, it'd been effortless.

He reached out with one hand - not even feeling a flicker of embarrassment when he realized it was shaking slightly - and awe and relief and triumph flooded through him as he picked up the cup.

Bloody hell.

I did it.

-

There is something very wrong, he thought with a mental snort a few days later, when possessing power over time itself isn't enough to keep you from being late to class. He lengthened his stride, sending a dark glance at Ron, who had seemed to gain quite a few inches over the last summer, along with an accompanying increase in speed - when he wasn't tripping over his own feet.

Not that Hermione was having any problems keeping up with the two of them, despite being the shortest of their number. She was leading them, in fact, irritation speeding her along. "If we're late to Defense I'm blaming you, Ron."

"What?" He smirked. Ron's response had contained a distinct squawking undertone. "I had nothing to do with this!" his friend continued. "It was your spell, it was Harry who cast it-"

"I didn't know that would happen," he interrupted. They were not blaming this on him.

"-Harry who cast it," Ron continued doggedly. "So how do I get the blame?"

"Harry," she said with exquisite precision as they ascended the next landing, "was not the one who thought putting his all into it was a good idea!"

"But he agreed to it. And it's not like I knew he'd blow up the classroom."

"I did not blow up the classroom."

They continued as if they hadn't even heard him. "It's Harry," she said. Apparently, in their code that was short for You should have known.

"Hey," he said, mildly insulted because really, he wasn't that bad. And it'd barely taken any scrubbing to remove the scorch marks from the stone.

"True." Ron shrugged.

"Hey!"

"It's okay, Harry," Hermione said as they approached the last corner, soothing tone a deliberate patronization. "We've known each other for years now; we understand. With you, these things just happen."

"For the last bloody time," he said, voice rising, because they'd been teasing him non stop about this, ever since they started scrubbing the evidence away, "I did not blow up the bloody classroom!" Then they turned the corner and screeched to a halt, narrowly avoiding a collision with the professor as he came the opposite way."

"Professor Aesalon!" Hermione squeaked. "Er, are we late?"

He studied them for a moment, dark eyes thoughtful, and Harry resisted the urge to fidget, uncomfortably sure their professor was taking in every detail, from the small burn on Ron's sleeve to the damp patches on his robe from Hermione's conjured water. But he responded to Hermione without commenting. "You have thirty-five seconds left, Miss Granger. I suggest you hurry."

"Yes professor," she said, then dodged around him, and over to the classroom door. Harry followed, Ron trailing behind him, as he tried to convince himself that he was imagining the feeling of the professor's eyes watching him as he went.

But despite the somewhat ominous start, the class was an interesting combination of practical and theoretical. Following the professor's warning that they'd be learning about dangerous magical plants and animals, they'd started with aquatic creatures native to Scotland, and



the day's lecture had been on hippocampi - some of which, the professor assured them, inhabited Hogwarts lake.

The lesson wrapped up a few minutes early, and Aesalon dismissed them off to potions with homework assignments in hand. Harry was packing up his book bag when the professor paused by his desk. "Stay for a moment after class please, Mr. Potter."

"Yes, professor."

The classroom slowly emptied and he waved Ron and Hermione on without him. Ron did a brief pantomime, complete with a few hand gestures between him and Hermione that looked vaguely obscene, but probably meant they'd wait for him by the door. He quirked an eyebrow at them, then shrugged and nodded, turning and walking towards the front of the class where Aesalon patiently waited.

He had a feeling he knew what this was about, so he took a deep breath and centered himself, the way he would if he was about to try something intricate wandlessly, then looked up at the older man. "You wanted to see me professor?"

Aesalon steepled his fingers, and looked at him with a direct gaze. "You understand, Mr. Potter, that when a professor overhears a young wizard, still in his schooling years, protesting most vigorously to his compatriots that he has not, in fact, committed a magical act of widespread destruction, that there will be... concerns."

Hermione, I'm going to kill you. And possibly myself. "Professor, Ron and Hermione were just teasing me. It was nothing."

"I see. And the scorch mark on Mr. Weasley's sleeve?" And Ron; Ron's dead too. Prat should have moved faster anyway.

"It really was nothing, professor." He made his best attempt at an airy wave. "We were just testing some flame-oriented protection spells on

some conjured blocks, and apparently we didn't cast them strong enough."

The professor raised an eyebrow, and Harry tried not to twitch at a mannerism he associated, almost exclusively, with his least favorite potions professor. Although at least with Aesalon no sneer was forthcoming. "Protection spells. I see." The professor's eyes flicked past him, to the door, where Ron and Hermione were probably still waiting. "You do realize that we introduce warding objects in our sixth year of defense studies? You three are rather precocious."

And actually, he hadn't, because they'd been coming back from one of their Care of Magical Creatures classes - one which had involved salamanders, and the fire spirits had gotten a little blisteringly close to him - and he'd observed that if Professor Kettleburn was going to keep bringing dangerous fire creatures, they should probably start doing research in the name of self-protection, and then Hermione's eyes had lit up and she'd said she had an idea...

He shrugged, the flash of humor breaking through. 'Cause with Hermione, it was really fifty-fifty whether she'd realized it was that advanced and decided not to tell them just to see if they could do it, or if she'd realized it was that advanced at all. "Probably that's why it collapsed when I put enough power into the incendio. But for minor sparks and stuff, it held up pretty well."

"That it held at all it to you three's credit." Silence for a few moments, while the professor studied him. Still in that place mentally where he was balanced, he waited without impatience. "Mr. Potter," the man said at last. "I will not offer insult by warning you, of all children, of the potential dangers in deeper magics. I do, however, offer some aide and guidance. If you three run across a spell of high interest - and high risk - I'd ask you come to me before you try performing it. I can not only facilitate your learning of the spell, but also ensure adequate safety... and security."

He felt his eyes narrow at the last add on, then tried belatedly to smooth out the betraying gesture. He stared at the man, wondering if he'd misunderstood, but the professor just looked back at him, waiting. Hell with it, he thought, and went with his instincts. "Any spell?" He wasn't even sure what he was asking, but...

The man answered obliquely. "I've heard about you, Mr. Potter."

"Yeah," he said, disgusted, "you and everyone else in the U.K."

"If you are speaking of wizarding Britain, all of it above the age of eight would be a more accurate summation of the population." Aesalon replied crisply. "But the newspaper articles and books are not to what I refer. I've listened to what the other professors will say about you, and to what the student body will share." And wasn't that a creepy thought? He was used to the other students gossiping about him, but he'd never thought the professors would... "If half of your rumored exploits are true, you will not let doubt, dubious safety, or official disapprobation deter you from a course you are set on. Turning away your request for supervision would result not in a cessation of activities, but merely drive you to covert ones. Knowing this, simply refusing aid is not a denouncement of your aims, but a hypocrisy that tacitly accepts any harm that falls upon you as justified, denying culpability because you were denied sanction. It is a stance I would reject with any child to which I had a responsibility."

Harry blinked at the flow of words, half wishing Hermione was right next to him, half simply thankful for all the extra study he'd done over the past months, without which, he'd be completely lost rather than partially. He's saying... If I asked for help with something and he refused, and he knew I'd still do it anyway, then if he didn't stop me he'd be responsible for any bad things that happened to me because of it?

Which was... kind of a slippery stance to take. Because if, say, Crabbe was going to do something stupid, and for some reason he

warned him, but then the Slytherin went on to do it anyway, he certainly wouldn't be feeling guilty. Well, maybe a very little, if the other boy was killed or something, but if he just ended up in the hospital wing, he'd probably be laughing about it with Ron.

But if the professor really meant it...

For one moment, he could see all the possibilities opening up; guided instruction rather than he and Ron and Hermione scrounging through their syllabi and the library index for topics to study. Help with learning new spells just from instructions in books, a demonstration of perfect pronunciation and wand movements in real life, as well as the tips and tricks adult wizards acquired. The ability to just ask, on any topic, and not to be told not to ask questions, or that he was too young, or that it was none of his business. This was far more than Professor McGonagall had ever offered...

The thought of his head of house jolted him, and the gathering excitement faded away. It was far more than McGonagall had ever offered. McGonagall, who'd taught his parents. McGonagall, who headed his house, and was supposed to be the one he could go to for any problems he had at Hogwarts. McGonagall... who'd turned away.

So he met his professor's gaze and smiled. It was a smile his friends probably wouldn't recognize, guileless and a little slow, with just a touch of gratefulness. It was a smile the Dursleys would have known instantly. "Of course I'll come, Professor." Then he turned, and headed toward the door.

"Mr. Potter." Aesalon's voice carried clearly.

He turned back, "Yes professor?"

The man studied him in silence for a moment, then spoke. "You're not even half way through your schooling, Mr. Potter, I'm going to be

your defense professor for a long time. Do you think you'll ever learn to trust me?"

Harry looked at Aesalon where he still stood besides his desk, and he thought about what to say. Thought about saying, I faced both my previous defense professors at wand point, and was forced to kill one and hospitalize the other. Or, I don't trust Professor McGonagall or Professor Dumbledore, and they have a two year head start on you. Or even, Answer any questions I have, teach me anything I ask, and I'll consider it.

But all of those responses revealed far too much about himself to be safe.

So he met Aesalon's eyes steadily, and said instead, "I don't think you'll still be here next year."

Then he turned and slipped between Ron and Hermione, leaving the classroom behind him.

-

"What did he want?"

At Ron's question, he turned from away from the view below them, and looked at the two of them. "I'm... not sure."

He watched as they exchanged glances, Hermione's worried and Ron's suspicious, and wondered when they'd all started assuming adults were a source of potential interference to be wary of. Wished he himself could believe that it wasn't true. But the professors talk of truth and loyalty and fairness... then they aren't willing to help those who will take a stand. We really can't trust them, because if they knew what we were doing, they'd try to stop us. Ron can't even talk to his parents, and I'd be willing to bet Hermione hasn't said anything to hers, either. And if you can't trust those who are supposed to love

and support you above anything...

And it wasn't like he had any practical experience at families. But he knew what he'd be willing to do for Ron or Hermione. What they'd be willing to do for him.

Frankly, none of the adults around measured up.

"We couldn't hear most of it from the door, mate," Ron said. "But we definitely heard him at the end. Why was he asking if you'd trust him? That seems kinda..." The red head made a vague, wobbly gesture in mid air.

"Odd," he supplied, and Ron nodded.

"Yeah. I mean, all the professors just expect us to trust them, but, you know, as professors. Not as, well, anything else."

"It's not out of place for a teacher to want his students to trust him," Hermione added, looking thoughtful, "But what brought this on? What on earth happened that made him think you didn't?"

He looked at her askance, "Uh, Hermione? I don't."

"Oh, honestly." She rolled her eyes. "Of course you don't. For that matter, neither do I. But my point is, how does he know that?"

"Oh." He frowned. "He heard us talking about the, er, overpowered incendio. And, you know, it really wasn't helped by you guys making it sound like I'd started world war three on the classroom. I guess he was, I don't know, maybe worried? Maybe interested?" He made a throw away gesture. "I still can't pin that one down. But anyway, he implied that we - the three of us - impressed him. Then he told me that he wouldn't insult me by warning us about the dangers of magic, but that he was available for help if we needed it. And I told him I'd come to him if we ran across something we thought might be

dangerous, but..." He shrugged. "I guess he didn't believe me."

Hermione nodded. "So the question is, was he just interested in helping students? Or was he interested in helping you. Or, I guess, if he's even interested in helping us at all. He might just be wanting to know before hand so he could stop us from trying things."

He shook his head. "He made the offer to all of us. Well, he seemed to treat us as a unit, anyway. And as to if he wanted to help us at all, I don't know. But I think he realizes that if we did go to him once, and he stopped us, we'd never go to him again. He even said something kind of about that."

It was Ron's turn to shrug. "Doesn't really matter in the end though, does it? Whether he's offering 'cause Harry's the Boy-Who-Lived, or if he's just offering because he's concerned... either way, we don't trust him enough to take him up on it."

That was... surprisingly insightful of Ron. He really has grown up a lot. If only the price hadn't been so high.

"Not yet, anyway," Hermione put in, apparently unwilling to scratch off any source of knowledge entirely. "Maybe someday..."

"We'll see." Who knew? Maybe Aesalon would break the curse. "We're agreed, then? We still do this on our own."

"On our own." Hermione nodded. "It's safest that way."

"On our own," Ron agreed.

He smiled at the sight of them, framed against the tower's backdrop, determined, fierce, and willing to take on the world to do what was right.

On our own, he echoed silently. He couldn't think of better company

to do it with.

-

The time turner was a godsend, but it wasn't a miracle.

Harry flipped his book closed and sighed, leaning back against his chair as he stared out the window and pondered the difference.

There are restrictions, Hermione's voice came from memory. You can't go back further than six hours. You can't repeat more than six hours in a given twenty four hour period, even split up into multiple trips. And, most importantly, you can't unmake events.

All of which was, yes, disappointing in a way. Because he'd wondered, for a moment, when he'd first held that seemingly fragile construction of metal and glass and pure magic in one hand, if the time turner was the answer to all their problems, gifting them with literally as much time as they could ever want. But on the other hand... well, in practice, the hours they had been given hadn't exactly turned out the way he'd imagined they would.

Really, he thought, reflecting over the past weeks, extra time sounds great in theory - but then you have to figure out how to use it. Because the problem wasn't the limited number of extra hours in a day the time turner could give them. The problem was that the time turner gave them time... and nothing else.

It didn't make them smarter. It didn't help them learn faster; didn't make it easier to concentrate when they were tired, or frustrated, or just plain burned out. It didn't allow them to memorize things quicker, or to remember things more completely or clearly. It didn't do anything, other than give them an extra four to six hours in a day.

Yesterday, they'd spent half of those hours sleeping. It hadn't been the first time.



He was still grateful they had it. He figured, at the very least, they were getting an extra two or three hours in of "study" time more than even the most dedicated of Ravenclaws might have each day. He was beginning to really start to get a handle on effortlessly switching from wand to wandless magic - then back again. Ron had pretty much finished up solidifying his grasp on subjects he'd only coasted through in the past two years. Hermione was keeping up with a course load that was, frankly, flat out crazy. The three of them were making top marks - enough that the professors were commenting. And they were studying extra projects on their own, as they found time. They'd managed this even as Ron and Hermione served out the detentions from the fight on the train, and he attended about that much time in Quidditch practice. All of which had only been possible with the time turner. But so far, they hadn't really had much time to put towards their goals.

We've needed this month, he acknowledged to himself. We started term with all these grand ideas, and no real plan how to do it. I'd almost screwed myself magically, Hermione might have agreed to help with Malfoy, but flinchingly, and Ron... he shook his head, remembering Ron as he'd met him in Diagon Alley, all burning rage and aching fury, then the Ron he'd met on the train, focused but still angry, not healed, but no longer a bleeding, open wound. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley did him no favors, lying. Ron's not always the quickest kid in the class, but he's not thick, either. Making it clear that he couldn't trust his own family... forcing him, however accidentally, to choose between them and Ginny, while all the while he knew their response was false...

He had a feeling that had almost destroyed his best friend. Ron was better now, but he'd never be exactly the same.

He sighed, shaking off the tangent, eyeing the book he'd discarded. Still, it's been over a month. And we need to start actually accomplishing something. I'm still pretty much clueless about the

wizarding world government and justice system, and what I'm learning in History is both too slow and lacking modern insight. We don't really know any more about Lucius Malfoy than we did at the beginning of the term. And I know Voldemort's still out there. Somewhere. Maybe making more items that will kill little girls who were only lonely, or possessing someone and hurting them til they'll do whatever he says. Getting ready to try to come back again and kill me. And maybe kill Ron or Hermione.

There had to be something more they could be doing. They were thirteen now, and getting top marks, but that wasn't enough. They had to keep learning stuff beyond their year. On top of regular schoolwork and social activities. And gathering info on Lucius Malfoy in particular, and the wizarding world government in general. Any two of those could be accomplished easily enough just with the extra hours in a day gained from time turning. Trying to accomplish all three...

Well, he thought with wry humor, I have all the time I need to think about this. Then he groaned and let his head thunk down on the desk. And now I'm just going in circles. I need to ask the others if they have an idea.

God knows he didn't.

-

"Ron, is there a way to make yourself smarter?"

Sitting around their study niche in the armory - a place they'd found themselves using more and more this year, between keeping the secret of the time turner, and keeping their other secrets - Hermione and Ron both looked up from the transfiguration assignment they'd been working on.

"Uh?" Ron asked, uncertain at the nonsequitor.

Hermione raised an eyebrow, eyes flicking over his practically untouched parchment. "I hear studying's good for that."

"No," he said, rolling his eyes. "I mean, magically, is there a way to make yourself smarter?"

"What," Ron asked, "like a charm or something you mean? I don't think so..."

"A charm, a potion... I don't know! But I mean, with all the things magic can do, there should be tons of ways to make learning easier. There's magic that lets people do everything else. Change hair colour, change eye colour, change into cats, fly..."

"Harry," Hermione said, and she sounded slightly exasperated with him. "Think about it: if there was a charm to make us smarter, don't you think that'd be the first thing the professors taught us? Or performed over us? It'd make their jobs a lot easier."

Which was true, but... "Well," he said, unwilling to give up just yet, "what about a potion, then?"

"It'd be the same thing though, wouldn't it?" interjected Ron. "They'd be lacing the pumpkin juice at breakfast with it or something."

"What if... what if it was made of really expensive ingredients?" he asked, grasping at straws in the face of their unrelenting logic. "So the school couldn't really afford to dose everyone everyday."

"In which case the rich purebloods and half bloods would be flaunting it to make fun of everyone who couldn't afford it," Hermione retorted. "Seriously, what brought this up?"

He forced himself to put words to his frustration, trying hard to be careful not to imply his thoughts were in any way a criticism. "It's just,

we're working so hard - and learning a lot too! - but, well, we've still barely scratched the surface of all we need to learn. It'd be a lot easier, and more to the point, faster, if we had something that let us remember better, or pick up new ideas quicker. And seriously, this is magic. It can do anything."

"Mate," Ron said, "I've never heard of a potion that will just... make you smarter. Or anything else, for that matter. They don't have potions that will make you beautiful, either, not as a permanent thing. Or better at transfiguration. Or more skilled at quidditch. It just... doesn't work like that. You can do a lot of temporary stuff, like glamour charms, or, or, a love potion will make you beautiful to the person you use it on, but it all wears off eventually. And it's all... well... surface stuff. Not changing what really makes you, you."

"Okay," he said. "Forget about easy, temporary stuff, like a charm we could pick up or a potion we could order away for. What about harder, long-term stuff?" Not that they didn't already have enough projects on their plates...

"Like what?" Hermione asked, half puzzled, half challenging.

"Like," he said, "Like, I don't even know what like. Like the kind of magic that does let you turn into an animal, easy and natural as breathing. Like, the kind of magic that could change you. Dumbledore said, last year, when we were talking about Voldemort, that he'd-" he frowned and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to remember, "he'd undergone some sort of magical transformation, and maybe, whatever he did, I figure that's probably one of the reasons he was so powerful, and maybe even why he didn't die-"

"Oh no," Ron shot straight up, interrupting. "You don't want to go that way, Harry. There's all sorts of stories and tales about dark wizards, who try to find ways to circumvent death, or gain more power, or any number of things. It always ends badly. Always."

"Well, I don't care about being more powerful, or immortal, or anything like that," he said, this time feeling like it was his turn to be exasperated. "I'm just saying, we know that it is possible for wizards to change themselves..."

"It's dark magic," Ron said flatly. "Not just dark; evil. Sacrificing children and tearing power from magical creatures - hell, Harry, you saw what came of Quirrel drinking Unicorn's blood! What you gain in power you lose somewhere else. It's not natural; it's corrupt."

"But," he said, confused, "that... really doesn't make any sense."

"Harry," Hermione suggested cautiously, "Ron's the one who grew up in the wizarding world. Don't you think he's the one who knows best?"

"I'm not doubting that, Hermione!" He gestured sharply with one hand, "And I'll say it again, I don't want to steal anyone's power, or life, or anything else. But it doesn't make sense that there'd be a high price for any and every change you make to yourself. I mean- Ron, most of these stories, it was a dark witch or wizard, right? Who was probably making a deal with dark creatures, or, or, like you said, sacrificing someone else for their goals. But, don't you think maybe the way they were going about it, or what they wanted out of it, had something to do with how bad it went? We don't pay a price for conjuring water, or floating objects, or flying, and none of that is natural either!"

"I don't know," Hermione replied while Ron seemed slightly confused, and it occurred to Harry that, maybe for Ron, floating objects and conjuration and flying was natural. "In fairy tales, and fantasy books, there's usually a price. And the more you gain, the bigger the price it seems to be."

"Maybe it's just that I never had the time or opportunity to read a lot," he countered, "God knows my aunt and uncle never encouraged it,

"but I still don't find it entirely convincing. I mean, what do muggles really know about magic? The few books I read seemed to put a lot more limits on magic than there really are. People getting tired casting simple spells, and stuff. I mean, it's magic. By definition it should be a lot more flexible than that."

"Even if you're right, we're still back to the point we made about charms, and potions. If it was that easy, everyone would do it."

"I'm not saying it would be easy," he said, looking at them both, "Hell, I'm not even saying it's doable in a non-evil way. I'm just saying it's worth it to find out more."

"I just want to ask," Ron put in, "when we started talking about using You-Know-Who as a role model."

"I'm not! Not exactly, anyway. I just-" He threw up his hands. "Never mind. Look, Hermione, you're the best at research, even though I know you also have the busiest schedule of the three of us school wise. Can you look for items, or potions or charms or any other way to make someone smarter? Even if there's a limited use aspect? I know you both think I'm barmy right now, but I still feel like I'm right. Or at least partly right. Isn't that worth checking out?"

"If it doesn't require eating someone's soul or something," Ron muttered, looking at Hermione.

"Alright," she replied, a little slow, and he watched the two of them exchange glances. "Since you feel that strongly, I'll look for examples of magic being used to make someone better or smarter. Now that we no longer have detentions three times a week, that frees up almost six hours. I'll see what I can find."

"Good. Thanks." He sighed, and sat back against the cushions, running his hand through his hair. "And Ron, whatever Hermione finds - if she finds anything - we'll talk about before we use. I'm not

exactly anymore eager to turn into Voldemort than you are. But we're going up against wizards decades older than us. No matter how much time we've had to learn a few extra spells? They've had like a hundred times more than that."

Ron met his eyes steadily, then sighed. "I know, Harry. I know. But most of those spells are evil. And..." his voice broke for a second, the Ron continued, "And You-Know-Who's diary was a perfect example of such things. Setting up a trap like that," Ron's hands fisted, "There are only so many reasons for it. Wherever he is, the bastard's probably stronger than he was. Because of what he took from Ginny."

It felt like ice had congealed inside him. "What?"

"You didn't know?" Ron was grim. "Never mind; stupid question. You wouldn't have had your parents telling you stories growing up, and I know we haven't covered things like this in History of Magic. The way you told me that the diary-image of You-Know-Who was coming back? Like, turning into a real person? That's beyond anything I've even heard about, but there are things like it, things evil wizards can do. I told you they steal life... what did you think they did with it? It's power. Not exactly power they can just add to their own, like, I don't know, adding a cup of water to your pitcher, but it's a power that can be used for- other things."

"I-" he shook his head. "No, I didn't know. But. I don't think Voldemort got anything from Ginny. I'd think destroying the diary would have prevented it from, I don't know, finding the real him and passing the power along."

Ron just shook his head. "Maybe."

They stared at each other, not sure what to say, for several minutes. There wasn't hatred between them, or even anger, and Harry knew, by all that was holy, that everyone else would have thought there

should be. But there was weight there, weight and ties, oaths spun from death and silence and an anger that would not forget. He wasn't sure if it was justice or vengeance they were seeking, anymore.

He wasn't sure either of them cared.

It was Hermione who broke the silence. "It's awful," she said. "And Ron, Harry's right, none of us will be doing anything similar. But it'll probably take me a few weeks to even find anything, and in the mean time, we should get back to our essays. This time turn will be over in about twenty minutes, and we should be finished before lunch."

"You're right," Ron muttered, and at last turned away. He bent his own attention back to his parchment.

No, he thought, still cold with the horror Ron's information had brought. I don't think I do care. Not when the outcome will be the same either way.

It has to be done. And since no one else will do it...

We will.

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Chapter End

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Notes:

- It really doesn't seem like there are a lot of canon ways to use magic to improve yourself, does there? We have all sorts of fanon ideas about occlumency and animagi - and there's brief mention of a 'wit-sharpening potion' in GoF and a 'memory' potion in SS, but JK Rowling seems to have oriented her series less around improvement



of self, and more about victory through luck and self-sacrifice.

Not that there's anything wrong with luck and self-sacrifice. But being in a situation where you don't have to rely on them would seem to be the preferable choice.

- To answer a question raised in a few reviews regarding the absence of Sirius and Remus, Arthur, in mourning, doesn't toss in a galleon for the Daily Prophet's drawing. Which means he doesn't win the contest, and the Weasley family never have their picture taken. No picture means no Pettigrew revealed, and thus no impetus for Sirius Black to break out of Azkaban.

I tend to agree with those who find the timing of Remus Lupin's employment as entirely too auspicious to be coincidental. I decided that without Sirius loose, Dumbledore was unlikely to have deliberately set out to secure Remus as the defense teacher for Harry's third year.

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Next Chapter:

One of the most aggravating things about Harry, she decided, staring down at the list before her, was his habit of being frustratingly, intuitively right, even when it seemed like all logical indicators should point to a contrary conclusion. Sometimes, it almost seemed like a magical gift in and of itself.

Well, she reconsidered, scanning the familiar items, he was sort of right, anyway. She'd been right too: although there did exist items and potions that would convey mental benefits upon the user, they were definitely not common. And certainly weren't the type the school would be supplying every student with.

Even including things of great rarity, she'd still had trouble. Three

weeks of research had yielded half a page.

Now she set that precious half page before her, and looked up into Ron and Harry's expectant faces.

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## Chapter Eight: affixing the hilt

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It made it easier for them to keep track of each other - and the amount of time they spent turned - if they all time-turned together, so he and Ron stuck to Hermione's schedule. Which meant they waved her off to her Ancient Runes class, then headed to the armory together.

Flopping down on the pillows, he cocked his head as he stared at his friend, considering. "Ron, how's your course load?"

Across from him, his red-headed friend groaned as he took the opposite side of the table, already pulling out his own books. "Merlin, don't make me think about it. You know, I never thought I'd be putting this much work into school. I'm turning into Hermione."

"Hermione actually likes learning all this stuff," he pointed out. "I mean, some of it is really interesting - more of it than I originally thought would be, anyway - but we're still doing this for a goal, you know? She just... likes it."

Which he understood better now than he had last year, but still... He winced as he recalled the last book he'd seen her reading. It'd been about six inches thick, and the type font he'd glimpsed over her shoulder had been small enough to make his eyes hurt. Hermione's great, but she takes it to bloody extremes.

"Well, she always has been a bit barmy." Ron nodded, comfortably assured with his read on their friend. "We've known that from first year. Anyway, what's up?"

"Something that needs to be researched," he answered. "I can do part of it; but it'd be easier if you could take some of it, too. And I know Hermione's better at fact digging than both of us, but she's

already working on her crazy schedule and that list of magical items or abilities that'd help us learn faster. And I don't want to put this off any longer than we already have."

Ron's smile faded as he frowned, apparently shuffling things in his head. Finally, he shrugged and nodded. "I think so. Is this a quick thing, or an ongoing project?"

"Definitely an ongoing project," he answered, a certain wryness infusing his words. "Originally I was going to do it - but after that discussion a few days ago... Anyway, it made me really realize how much more about the wizarding world you know than me."

"Well, duh." Ron rolled his eyes. "Magical parents, remember?"

He rolled his eyes in turn and flicked out his hand and a focused twist of will. Ron yelped as invisible magic poked him in the forehead. "Hey, no wandless magic on your friends, remember?" He rubbed his hand across his forehead. "Prat."

"Arse."

Ron grinned at him, unrepentant. "No, seriously. If you're just now realizing I have a better grasp of the wizarding world than you, you deserve mocking. There will be mocking on an epic scale. You will be mocked like you have never been mocked before. It might drive you to tears-"

This spell, he couldn't do wandlessly. But that was okay. The silencing spell had seemed so incredibly useful, when he'd first run across it, that he'd made certain to learn it immediately. Capable of shutting down cold any opponent who had to actually speak his spells; and since it didn't actually harm or stun, far less likely to get him in trouble with the teachers.

Also, useful on someone he'd never want to actually hurt... even

when his best friend was at his most annoying.

He raised his wand with a smirk, as Ron glared at him impotently. "Can I continue now?"

The gesture his friend threw at him good naturedly was definitely obscene, but he nodded. Harry canceled the jinx with a wave of his wand, and continued his previous train of thought. "I knew you know more about the magical world in general, yes. But I didn't think about things like... legends. Stories. Fairytales. Whatever you want to call them. And you don't even realize how much background information you know, 'cause it's just natural to you."

Which was, usually, not even noticeable. But, sometimes? Incredibly frustrating.

This should have been my heritage too.

"So you want me to look up a legend for you?" Ron was still smiling, but taking him seriously now.

"No." He shook his head. "I want you to research immortality."

Ron stared at him. "Uh, what?"

"Voldemort did something that let him live even as a... I don't even know what the right word for him would be. He's not a ghost. But he's not alive either. Not as I think you count living, anyway. He doesn't bleed, or breathe, or have a body of his own. Except he apparently can take other's. And Dumbledore said that he was trying to come back. That's why he was after the Philosopher's Stone in the first place. And I don't know the headmaster that well, but if he's worried about it? I figure there's a good chance it could happen. And we can't stop it until we know why he's not staying dead."

Ron's smile was completely gone now. "So you want me to see if I

can discover, what? How he did it? Harry... that's..."

"Going to be really, really hard," he broke in. "I know. I'm not expecting you to do it alone. But I've never heard of anything that's commonly taught around here that lets you - exist - after you've been killed. Have you?" Ron shook his head. "Then - unless Voldemort invented it wholesale - it's probably something you only hear about in stories or legends, right? I mean, being un-killable - that sounds like a legend to me."

Ron ran his hands through his hair. "Yeah, I guess. So, what, you want me to find out if the legends are true?"

"Well, if you want to go that far, you could. But I was thinking more if you could make a list, maybe. Collect every single legend or story or whatever of immortality you run across. And Voldemort apparently went traveling for a decade or two, so... Foreign legends too. Ask your friends or family, if you need to. Read childrens' books. Remember bed time stories. Whatever. Once we have them all, we could probably start going through them, weeding out which ones might have some sort of truth to them, and which are just... useless. That we can do together. But someone has to make the original list, and since you actually grew up with all this..."

"It makes sense that it would be me. Right." He sighed and closed his eyes, rubbing his temples as he groaned. "You did say it'd be an ongoing project."

He gave a sympathetic smile and shrugged. "Sorry?"

"Candy. You will owe me candy. And don't think you're getting out of helping me."

"Hell, Ron." He shrugged again, "You put all that work into helping me discover the key to killing Voldemort? I'll buy you a broom. Even if it turns out later that we're wrong and we find out he did something

else entirely."

Ron's eyes popped open, unhappy. "Harry..."

Oh, hell. Don't tell me I poked his pride again.

He frowned. "If you dare try telling me a broom is too much repayment for doing so much..."

"I'm not doing it for a reward!"

"Neither am I." He squashed his annoyance before it could bloom. "And I'd like to think you see a difference between me saying 'thank you' and me trying to bribe you." He raised an eyebrow at his friend. "Is this a charity thing? 'Cause I'd like to remind you - I got my broom as a gift. Certainly didn't pay for it. You're saying you're better than me?"

A heartbeat passed, as Ron seemed to struggle. Then another. Finally, he shook his head and relaxed, a smile touching his face. "Of course I'm better than you. Haven't you been paying attention?"

He smiled back, happy. There was a time, he thought, that Ron wouldn't have been able to accept such a gift. And he felt an undeniable gladness that things were different now. Not trying to hide his pleasure, he hauled his book bag up to the table, pulling reference books and unfinished essay out. "Embrace your delusions. I've got homework to finish."

Ron's agreement was a hum as he opened his own books, and bent his head to work.

-

He circled the skies as, below him, Oliver barked orders and the chasers swirled in response, switching directions in a tight curve,

quaffle making a complicated dance between them.

Quidditch was a time sink. With the first match of the year coming fast, it was even more of a time sink than normal. Especially since Oliver seemed to have gone just a little bit crazy at the prospect of not achieving the Quidditch Cup on his last year of school and captaincy. Extra practices had been mercilessly scheduled.

He felt a little bit guilty about spending so much time playing, sometimes, but he couldn't bring himself to give it up.

Each of their group tried to keep at least one side project going on besides schoolwork, in addition to the general extra work they put into just acquiring knowledge. Ron was looking up immortality myths. Hermione was studying magical items and skills. So far, he'd been focusing on defensive magics, but between quidditch and wandless magic practice, he wasn't able to put as much time into it as he wanted to.

On the other hand, I think I'd go flat out gibbering insane if I couldn't fly occasionally.

Because that's really what he loved most.

Oh, he loved quidditch, too. Loved the competition, and - he wasn't ashamed to admit it to himself - loved winning. And being cheered on by a stadium full of student fans was a different kind of recognition than the Boy-Who-Lived fame; a type he enjoyed much more. But flying was a release all on its own. Problems, worries, the complicated tangle of thoughts and Oh my God, how do I do this all seemed to just... fade away.

Usually.

"Heads up, Harry!"



The warning from behind sent him down into a spiraling dive; a small ball whistled by, and then George sped through the space he'd occupied seconds before in pursuit of the bludger that was making a slower, wider reverse to come back after Harry. The older teen met it on the way and his bat made a loud crack, sending the bludger down across the field to where Fred waited.

"Thanks, George."

He grinned back, "Can't lose you so close to the game, right? Oliver'd kill me."

"Gee, how kind of you."

"Anytime!" The twin turned to head back down field, "Mind catching the snitch soon, though? Oliver said we could stop practice soon as you grabbed it, and I've got a date." Red eyebrows waggled outrageously as he glanced back, and Harry had to laugh.

"Why not?"

He'd actually located it a few minutes ago, but he'd been content to circle lazily, enjoying the flight. Now he dropped into a dive, plummeting toward the earth and his tiny, golden target.

Time to get back to work, then.

-

That night, he sighed, staring up in the darkness at the canopy of his bed. He was tired - these days, they were all tired - but he couldn't fall asleep. His mind was too busy, buzzing after the conversation he'd had with Ron and Hermione earlier that evening.

Wandless magic wasn't like wanded magic. He'd realized that as soon as he really started using it. And even if he hadn't, the trouble

he'd first had, trying to merge the two styles once school started up again, would have clued him in. But what he hadn't realized was that everyone else thought it was.

He'd been trying - once again - to explain it to Hermione, who hadn't been quite satisfied with the dry accounts she'd dug up in books. But she, and Ron for that matter, had been under the impression that it was exactly like casting spells silently... only without a wand. But it really, really wasn't.

When he floated a feather, he didn't think wingardium leviosa at it. He didn't try to cast a spell. It was nothing so... so ordered. And he hadn't realized spells were ordered, until he could wield magic another way. But the way spells worked - the almost mathematical precision he'd felt, transfiguring one item to another - it was so much easier, so much more precise, than essentially reaching out and twisting the world to his will.

Which had, in the end, been the best way he'd been able to explain wandless magic to Hermione.

Her nonplussed expression had been, itself, very eloquent.

And if I was, oh, a few thousand times stronger than I actually am, it might even be as impressive as it sounds.

His thought sounded rueful even to himself, but there was no way of getting around it. Brute force versus delicacy, but there the irony: brute force was not stronger. The careful control of magical energy and the corresponding focus of raw effect into intended channels rendered blunt force sadly ineffective in comparison... even applied in greater strength. A raging bonfire or a blowtorch - when it came to cutting through steel, it wasn't the bonfire one chose.

He could lift and move things, now, with considerable speed and precision. Could even - after the last month of work, spurred on by

memories of the Chamber - pull things to him with almost no hesitation. Which, he figured, would come in damn handy if he was ever stupid enough to drop his wand again.

The funny thing was, when he'd first started all this, he hadn't really been looking for a weapon. All he'd wanted was to be able to freak his aunt and uncle out enough that they'd leave him alone, and let him come and go as he needed to. He'd kept at it partly to keep in practice, and partly to see how good he could get, but mostly because he had to. His summer of undoing all the careful, measured control he'd learned over the first two years had been - it seemed - irrevocable. Shattering all the glass in the Dursley's living room had been the biggest sign to him that he needed to get better control now, but even before that, things had started happening if he got upset. His magic wasn't tamely chained, anymore.

Which makes it sound like its got its own mind.

Which it didn't. And darn Hermione for making me start to analyze all this anyway.

But it wasn't so much a question of... of control or non-control. Well, it was, but not in that he was fighting some sort of- of battle. With his magic. It was more like-

Like as if, before, his magic had been deeply buried. He had to feel strongly in order to call it up without his wand, and he'd hardly even really felt his magic itself at all. He'd say the words, flick the wand - and things would happen. He'd sort of vaguely had a feeling about how to push harder at a spell, how to put more of himself - his magic - into it, but it'd been... fuzzy. Sort of half-instinct, half-desire, and liable to work only intermittently, albeit more and more often going from first year to second.

And now...

Now I feel my magic all the time. I feel it when I cast something - feel how much I use. Feel it as it shapes itself into spell, feel it being channeled through my wand. Feel it stretching if I get angry, feel it moving as I use it to wandlessly pick up objects.

It was bloody distracting.

He had to focus every time he cast a spell, now. At least, he did if he didn't want explosions, or to accidentally do things like incinerate a candle instead of lighting it. Or, even more embarrassing, not light it at all.

It sucked, and he might have started really, truly regretting letting this genie out of the bottle, if not for one thing which had given him hope.

When I transfigured that cup, finally, and everything I've transfigured since... I have to be careful. And delicate. And control and precision are practically becoming my motto, now. And it takes forever to concentrate enough to build that sort of clear, detailed picture in my mind. But when I do...

It took him longer to do one of his transfigurations than most of his classmates. But increasingly, he was getting them exactly right on his very first try, no matter how complex.

It was a tradeoff, right now. Speed for precision. Quickness or control. More of one meant less of the other.

But he was getting better.

And maybe, someday, it wouldn't be.

-

Days later, he didn't quite understand how he found himself arguing with his best friend. He knew the sequence of events, could recount

point by point the topics of conversation, but that didn't really explain why Ron was now staring at him, horrified. He stared back at Ron, disbelieving. Then forced himself to think.

Most of the time, wizards didn't seem that different from muggles to him.

And wouldn't that observation piss Malfoy off?

But it was true.

They were crazier - and who decided cards that blew up in your hands were the perfect way to liven up a game anyway? - but not different. They were just... people. People with magic. And at first the whole magical world had just seemed so incredible - brooms and wands and robes and cauldrons, unicorns and phoenix and dragons - an entirely different world. But once he'd stopped staring and started living, it was just... normal.

The whole quill and parchment thing was annoying in the beginning, but really, quills were almost like pens - self inking and enchanted not to drip or smear - rather than anything that'd have required a lesson in calligraphy. Sure, his first attempts at using them had been comparatively messy, but daily practice writing essays had been all it took to re-adjust.

The robes had also been kind of... Well. But they were surprisingly comfortable, and durable, and seemed oddly - magically - resistant to dirt and stains. And he'd never liked muggle clothing - never had a chance to, always wearing Dudley's old clothes - so switching over to wizarding wear had been painless (and even appreciated).

Quidditch, of course, was just brilliant. And probably always would have been, even if he hadn't loathed muggle sports in primary, what with continuously being picked last on teams, and Dudley deciding anything that allowed physical contact was a school sanctioned

opportunity for Harry Hunting.

The stories - from what Ron said - well, they were different. But there were still princess and princesses and dragons and wizards. And even if witches were now the heroines in addition to the villainesses, well, that didn't change the battles against giants and trolls, or the good versus evil aspect, or the happily ever after.

And the wizards celebrated Halloween, and Christmas, and Easter, just like muggles did. They valued the same things: money, and good food, and nice clothing, and playing games, just like muggles did. They had police and schools and a minister, just like muggles did. They laughed and joked and got angry and sad and scared, just like muggles did. So Harry had slowly gotten used to being a fledgling wizard - and really, had pretty much just considered himself a muggle... with magic. Which worked.

Because most of time, Wizards didn't seem that different from muggles to him.

But sometimes, sometimes, he was reminded that yes, there was a culture gap. Because sometimes, wizards decided on the most incomprehensible, stupid, bat-shit crazy opinions.

Professor Aesalon had mentioned Unbreakable Vows in defense last week. He'd been thinking about it, on and off, since then. Because binding up ten or fifteen percent of your magic into a vow? Didn't seem like a great deal to sacrifice compared to a society without murders or theft.

"Please explain to me," he forced out, through gritted teeth. "how making all wizards or witches swear to never cause deliberate harm to another sentient being, would be a bad thing. Except, you know, in self defense. And while you're at it, stop looking at me like I just advocated child sacrifice."

"Harry." Ron shook his head. "Don't you see - it's wrong."

"For the love of God, Ron. Why?"

"It's- You can't bind peoples' magic like that. You can't. That's- It's just- It's our right to use magic freely. It's what makes us wizards. You're- Binding every wizard like that, it'd be a violation." Ron's eyes were bright, utterly convinced, and almost capable of convincing him by sheer force of his certainty, but Harry just shook his head. Almost. Because what the hell?

"It's just an oath not to do bad things!"

"It's an insult, Harry! It's an insult and it'd be an atrocity! Wars have begun when a wizard or witch made a request for an Unbreakable Vow for a reason deemed insufficient. An Unbreakable Vow is a sacrifice. An honor. You- you'd demote it to a form of mind-control - you'd cripple every member of our society!"

Their voices raised as they tried to talk over each other.

"Cripple? It'd save people-"

"By destroying part them-"

"How can you possibly-"

"How can you not-"

"It's stupid!" He finally shouted. "It's stupid and wrong and all wizards are apparently idiots. Because maybe if you'd all sworn not to hurt each other, Voldemort wouldn't be running around! Death Eater's wouldn't be around. My parent's would be alive! Ginny would be alive! But apparently, you'd rather have an extra ten percent of your magic than a living, breathing, sister!"

Then he stopped, abruptly. Ron was staring at him, eyes wide. Then Ron's eyes went hard, and he realized what he'd just said. Because he knew, knew that that had been utterly untrue - and consequently unforgivable to say. Oh my God. I didn't mean-

"Muggleborn." Ron said. His voice was flat, and cold. It was the first time Harry had heard Ron say it like a curse.

It wasn't mudblood. But for all intents and purposes, it could have been.

There was a spark of answering anger, but of the two of them, he knew which of them had crossed that line first. "Ron-"

"No." Ron stood, and picked up his books and satchel. "No." He stared at Harry, then shook his head. "For the first time, I understand some of the pure-blood bigots. And I can't believe that it's because of you."

Then he turned and walked away.

And Harry just... watched. Feeling like he'd been punched in the gut.

For a long time, he stood there. Watching the entry-way. Waiting for Ron to reappear. Or for himself to wake-up. Or something.

Waited in vain.

So eventually, he ran a hand through his hair, then turned to gather up his pack.

He needed to think. Away from everyone else.

Dear God, how could I have been so stupid?

-



But he wasn't convinced he wasn't right.

That was the crux of it.

So now he sat by the lake, hiding under his invisibility cloak, trying to think. He didn't usually come here. The first time he'd come here... that had been on the day after he'd killed Quirrel. The last time he'd been here... he forced away the memories.

This wasn't a happy place for him. But it was quiet. And isolated. And he could think about whether he'd actually been wrong.

Not about having made that remark about Ginny. He shouldn't have said that. Should never have said that. He'd just been so- So angry. And frustrated. And Ron wasn't even listening and apparently the whole world was crazy and for the past few days the only thing that'd been in his mind, like a record set on auto-replay, was: my parents didn't have to die. Ginny didn't have to die.

So in one moment, aching and haunted and furious, he'd claimed Ron valued himself above his sister.

It hadn't been true. It hadn't been right.

I meant to hurt him, he acknowledged to himself, grimly. To hurt Ron. His best friend. His brother in all but blood. The one he'd sworn to help, had sworn vengeance with. The one he'd kill for. Die for. Defend to his last breath against anyone else.

But apparently, not against myself.

It was- It hurt. To acknowledge that. He felt guilty. And angry still - with himself. With Ron. With escalating arguments, and the stupid wizarding world, and Unbreakable Vows, and Voldemort, and his

parents.

With everything.

But especially, with himself.

And it was all tangled up together, the anger and guilt and helplessness, (because how did he fix this?), and twisted through everything else: the confusion.

Because he still didn't understand.

Because fifteen percent - hell, even fifty percent - of his magic ability seemed like it'd be a small price to pay, to have never lost his parents.

But he couldn't just say "The wizarding world is stupid" anymore. (Although they were, were, were.) Because Ron deserved better than that from him.

He needed to apologize. He wanted to apologize.

But he couldn't do that, until he understood.

-

"I'll leave you to think," Hermione said, voice soft. "But Ron - when he comes to apologize... please let him."

He listened to the door close quietly behind her as she left, then stared out across the forest once more.

When, not if. Hermione, at least, was confident Harry would regret what he said. Which was more than he could say.

No. He forced himself to stop. Think. Be fair. Even if he didn't want to.

Even if all he wanted to do was rage and rage and rage...

I saw his face, as soon as he realized what he said. He regretted it.

He wasn't sure that was enough.

He couldn't believe Harry had said that. Didn't understand why the other boy wanted to hurt him so bad. What Harry could have thought Ron had done that would justify his using his sister against him. And now... He clenched his fist.

He'd been furious when Hermione had first come to find him. Furious, and expecting her to try to convince him that he was wrong. But she hadn't even had a clue what had happened - only that he and Harry both hadn't been at their usual study spot - and when she'd prodded he'd...

Well.

If he did talk to Harry, the black-haired boy would owe Hermione a hell of a lot. It'd been close, earlier. Between walking away - or going for his wand. And he'd still been angry when she found him. He hadn't wanted to speak about it; hadn't wanted her analyzing and questioning and poking. But when she'd refused to let the topic drop...

His tirade against Harry had made her flinch, but she hadn't jumped in to interrupt. Or defend the other boy. She'd just... listened.

And when he'd finally run down, spoke.

She had... some points, he admitted to himself. Reluctantly, grudgingly, admitted. And, even smarter of her, she'd never tried to convince him he'd been wrong. Pointed out a few things, but never tried to pretend he didn't have a right to be pissed as hell at the bloody bastard who was his best friend.

That thought made him pause.

Hell.

Because he was angry at Harry. So angry. And he could chose to keep being angry. Could choose to hold onto it and revel in it - he was good at being angry. But...

But.

He sighed. Unclenched his fists. Harry was... important to him. A brother. More than that, one of the only people he trusted. And using Ginny against him...

He broke that trust. But at least he knows it. Regrets it.

He couldn't forgive Harry. Not now. Not when he hadn't even asked for forgiveness. But Hermione was confident that he would.

I can't let it go. He hasn't earned that.

But for all that Harry had done in the past. Sworn to. Promised. For all of that...

I'll listen.

His fists clenched again.

But damn it, Harry. It'd better be good.

-

Hours later, Harry groaned, dropping his face in his hands.

He'd come to few conclusions.

It was obviously a wizard-born thing. So he needed to talk to someone wizard-born about it.

But who to ask?

He'd like to ask someone he trusted, but the only person he trusted, aside from Ron, was Hermione. And she was as muggle-raised as he. Failing that, he wanted someone whose judgment he trusted, so he started thinking about all the adults or older wizards or witches he knew.

He thought about asking Professor Dumbledore, but. No. Not after that last scene in his office. McGonagall - no. Binns - no, he didn't know the ghost well enough. Sprout - he didn't really know her at all. Same with Kettleburn. Trelawney; he snorted. Snape - hell no. Mr. or Mrs. Weasley. His heart twinged as he remembered Ron's comment about their... discomfort... with mentions of him. No. Professor Aesalon? Mr. Oddly Interested in him? No. Hagrid?

For a moment he thought about Hagrid. Because weirdly enough, he did trust Hagrid, in a way he wasn't sure he'd trust McGonagall. But Hagrid's judgment? He thought about that for a second, then winced. No.

Not Hagrid, then.

And he didn't want to go to students. And this obviously wasn't something he'd be finding in books. Which really... left one person. Who he wasn't close to, but who had helped him before. Had answered his questions before. Hadn't violated his trust yet. And it was probably sad, he realized, that choosing whose opinion you wanted to hear could be based not on who you trusted, but on eliminating those who had proven themselves not to be trusted.

He stared over the lake a little longer, then sighed, and rose.

It was time for office hours. And he had a professor to go see.

-

"Back again, Mr. Potter?"

There was a weird second of déjà vu, then he shook his head.  
"Professor Flitwick?"

"Come in, come in." Cheerful, welcoming; the small professor almost made him smile. "I was just in the middle of answering a few questions for Mr. Jodher here, but if you're willing to wait, I'm sure I could be with you shortly?"

He nodded an acknowledgment to the student sitting in front of Flitwick's desk, and turned his attention back to Flitwick. "That'd be fine, professor."

It was maybe fifteen minutes later that Jodher thanked the professor and left. Flitwick turned to Harry, expressive face questioning. "So what's the problem, Mr. Potter? The animation charm giving you trouble? I dare say they can be a bit difficult before you get the hang of it."

He shook his head, "No, Professor. In fact..." he paused, feeling awkward. Fiercely resenting McGonagall, because hell, he shouldn't have to go to someone he barely knew with this. "Professor? Can I ask a question?"

Flitwick raised an eyebrow, but nodded, settling himself against the desk. His madcap, excited energy seemed to dampen, just a bit, the professor's dark eyes focused and intent. Here was the scholar who could sit for hours, researching the arcane fields of magic. Or, it was rumored, annihilate an opponent in the dueling field. "Of course you can ask. That's what we professors are here for, after all. And if I

don't have an answer, I'll either tell you why, or go find it."

He looked down at his hands, then looked back up, "Even if it's... sensitive?" A truly interesting expression crossed the diminutive professor's face, and he blurted out, "Not like that! It's just... Ron and I got into a fight... and I don't even understand why."

"You fought... because you asked him a question?" Flitwick asked him in a careful tone.

He shook his head. "No. I mean, I wanted to ask you if you knew why he got mad? I think..." he lowered his voice a little, "I think it might be a wizard-born thing?"

The professor studied him for several moments, then spoke. "I promise not to get offended if you ask a question respectfully, and fully desirous of enlightenment. Even an uncomfortable one. I may not answer, but in that case I will, as I said before, at least attempt to explain why I will not or can not do so."

That... seemed pretty clear. "Alright. Then. The thing is... Professor Aesalon mentioned Unbreakable Vows. And I thought - I said, well, why don't they make everyone take a Vow not to hurt anyone else?"

"Oh dear."

-

He watched Ron from the doorway, remembering Flitwick's words.

It's cultural. The free practice of magic - muggleborn don't always understand. For us - wizards - magic is everything. One of the worst punishments in our society, is to have your wand snapped. To have such done to you... it's saying you're incapable. Irresponsible. Completely and utterly unworthy of trust.

Criminals don't have their wand snapped. Failures do. Those who prove themselves incapable of taking up the mantle of an adult magic user.

Wizards and witches have killed themselves over such disgrace.

And even those who suffer such a fate - they're not asked to bind their own magic. They might no longer be able to properly channel and use it through a tool, and that's their punishment for their failure to master the power magic gave them, but they're not... crippled.

Crippled. There had been that word again. When he'd inquired about it...

Squibs - rare muggles born to wizards - were once quietly killed. Or abandoned in the wilderness. Particularly loving parents might abandon the child in a muggle village or orphanage, instead. To be without magic in our society... yes. Crippled is how most tend to feel over the issue. And to do that to ourselves - or our children - it would not find favor.

Then, finally:

Remember, most go through life without ever having violence touch them. Of your classmates, do you know anyone else who lost parents or family members to another's wand? You would gladly sacrifice part of your magic to keep loved ones safe, but most never think that a trade off to be made. And for lesser offenses... ten percent of your magic - or never being stolen from? Which would you choose?

So. That was it.

He wasn't sure he agreed with the wizard-born. Because he was one of those rare people who had lost someone to violence. Lots of someones to violence. And part of him still said that Ron - because of



Ginny - should agree with him, no matter how he'd been raised to think. Should realize the rest of the world was wrong. But...

He's my friend. Not my slave. He has a right to disagree with me.

I didn't have a right to use Ginny against him.

"Ron."

His friend looked up, eyes still cool. "Harry."

He made an awkward, helpless gesture with his hands. "Can we talk?"

Ron's face was still remote, but his eyes narrowed. "I don't think we have anything to say to each other, do you?"

Damn it, Ron. Give me a chance. "I need to apologize."

That seemed to pause his red-headed friend. The other boy studied him carefully, then nodded, still cold. "Alright."

The dorm room was deserted at this hour - and probably would be for at least another thirty minutes. Dinner was not something most young adolescent males wanted to miss.

Except us.

He took a deep breath. "I want to apologize. I had no right to use Ginny against you. And I know what I said wasn't true."

There was icy silence for a few seconds, then Ron finally cracked. "Dammit, Harry. Why? Why the hell would you say something like that?" Beneath the anger, there was betrayal. That hurt the worst.

"I don't have an excuse! I was angry and frustrated and I just... I was

raised- Hell, Ron. I didn't realize wizards were-" Do not say crazy. Do not say crazy. "That serious over being able to practice magic. I didn't realize it was-" He cast about for words, "Was, like, holy." He took a deep breath. "I didn't realize I was disrespecting your religion. Didn't realize that's why you discounted my words in turn."

Ron stared at him for a second, then shook his head, like he wasn't quite sure of what he'd just heard. "Religion?"

"It kinda is, Ron. At least, that's what it feels like to me. Magic's... one of your founding principles of society. And informs what you know about the afterlife. And... anyway. That's not the point. The point, is that I didn't listen to you about why you thought I was - wrong. I just made assumptions and I got pissed because you weren't listening to me, and all I could think was that Mom and Dad would still be alive if someone had forced that Vow on Voldemort's ass when he was a student. So I was just, mad and upset, and I felt like you should be agreeing with me, and that you were discounting my parents' deaths and... I'm sorry."

"You were an ass."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I don't have to agree with everything you say, Harry."

"I'm know. And I'm sorry. I'm not saying you do."

Silence. Ron looked at him, and he met his friends eyes steadily. It felt like minutes, before Ron sighed, and the tense shoulders loosened slightly.

"Don't do it again."

He exhaled, a whooshing breath of relief. Thank you. "I won't. Never." Then he took a cautious few steps forward, and held out his

hand. "Friends?"

Ron's hand in his felt like a second chance. "Always."

-

Later, working side by side on their transfiguration homework, he had to ask. "I was surprised you weren't... harder to convince. I was afraid you wouldn't even talk to me."

Ron didn't look up from his scroll. "I almost didn't."

"Can I ask: why, then?"

"Hermione."

Harry winced. Ah. "You told her?"

"She wanted to know why we both weren't there, why we weren't talking, and what was wrong."

He hadn't really seen Hermione since the last time-turn of the day, as she'd gone off to her class and he'd escaped to the lake to think. "And she said?"

"She said you're an ass." Ron looked up at last. "But she guessed about that part about your parents. And pointed out that, to you, it probably sounded like I didn't care at all about their deaths, if I wasn't willing to embrace such measures as would have prevented them."

He gave Ron a squint-eyed glance at the last part.

Ron shrugged. "That's a quote."

"Hell." He looked down at his transfiguration book. "She's going to tear a strip off me next time she sees me, isn't she?"

Ron's smile was just a trifling smug. "Consider it restitution."

He made his wince extra theatrical, then hid a smile at Ron's smirk. Turned back to his homework.

Never again, Ron. I promise.

-

She cornered him in the common room the next morning, as they waited for Ron to finish getting ready for breakfast. In retrospect, it was a tactical error to come down without reinforcements. And she might have been practicing ninja magic skills, or something, because he didn't even see her coming til she had a grip on him, and when she dragged him towards the far corner she was surprisingly strong.

She whirled to face him, opening her mouth, and he cut her off before she could speak. "I was an ass, Hermione."

She mouth clicked shut and she narrowed her eyes at him as he continued. "I was an ass, and I've apologized to Ron. For saying that about Ginny. For getting that mad in the first place. And I want to thank you for talking to Ron for me, because otherwise he probably wouldn't have been calm enough to let me apologize. And to apologize to you, for pulling you into our fight. And I promise to never, ever, do something like that again."

She studied him carefully for a moment, and he began to worry about the potential pain infliction possibilities of ninja magic, when she nodded. "Well. As long as you know. And fixed things. And your apology is accepted."

Then Ron came down the stairs, and met Hermione's worried, questioning stare with a nod and a faint, reassuring smile...

She smiled back, then turned, expanding the smile to include him, before gesturing to the door. "Shall we?"

-

It was too much to hope that his and Ron's short fight would be erased so easily, but as days passed, the last remaining tensions eased. Forgiveness was augmented by laughter and teamwork, and November passed in a whirl of studying. When the month died so too did the last, lingering, memories that stood between them.

Ron had forgiven him. Hermione had forgiven him.

He had even forgiven himself, but only after swearing to himself that he would never, ever, be so stupid again. And then started proving it.

He practiced wandless magic, and wandless magic, and above all else, practiced controlling his temper. He sat quietly in classes, the only notes he wrote those that recorded his professor's words, no longer his own to pass to Ron or Seamus or Dean. (Neville had always been just slightly too terrified of the professors to participate in the casual rule-breaking of note passing the rest of them enjoyed.) Malfoy's gibes seemed more and more pathetic as the weeks went by, particularly since he flinched if Ron made any sudden moves, and he never mentioned Ginny again. Older students were nodded to with polite restraint, teachers quietly minded.

Even those he was quickly losing all respect for.

Turning a page in his notebook, he watched Trelawney with a contempt he carefully hid. She might be a real seer - who knew? - but he doubted it. Doubted it very strongly. And even if she was...

She was still a shitty teacher.

He didn't swear a lot - never got into the habit at the Dursleys, where

it wouldn't have been tolerated, and never did at Hogwarts, since Hermione would disapprove - but Trelawney was worth swearing over. At least in his head. Because it wouldn't matter if she was the greatest Seer to walk the planet, at this point. He loathed her as a teacher.

Divination was the art of discovering - divining - information through magical means. It's most famous - and infamous - branch was predicting the future. It was also the most imprecise, difficult, and in his opinion, flat out useless, form of it.

One of the first things Rebecca Discern's book had said on the subject was that if you were asking "What happens in the future?" you were asking the wrong question. It made one a passive observer of their own fate.

And I've never done passive very well.

Better to ask, the author continued, "If I do this, what will happen?"

And as she pointed out, you didn't need fortune telling to guess that. You just needed a firm grasp of logic, analysis, and information on the current situation. The logic and analysis was up to the individual to supply. But the information... When it came to gathering information, divination could help.

His copy of Unfogging the Future sat on the table in front of him, nearly pristine, bookmarked to the current section they were covering in class. Back in his trunk, secure in his dorm room, Forget the Future - the True Treasure of the Diviner's Discipline was dog-eared and worn.

Scrying and other such methods of gathering information weren't really easier to learn than future telling, but they were possible to learn - at least in the basics - without a native gift. And if there was one thing Discern had been clear about - one thing even Trelawney

agreed with - it was that you needed some native talent to be a seer. Oh, everyone could probably pick up little things, simple predictions that could be read in tea leaves and cards, like if they were likely to have a good day that day, or maybe even - if they were really lucky - if there was a troubling event upcoming that month. But to predict the specific actions of individuals? Forecast the movements of a battle? See into a future years down the road?

The only ones who got even close were prophets, and they were just glorified channels. They didn't prophesize at will. Which meant whatever information they might receive, wouldn't necessarily be the information they wanted.

Harry didn't know if he had that native talent, in minor predictions or great ones. He wasn't sure if he cared. Everyone grabbed at seeing the future like it was this great, shiny treasure, endlessly fascinating and a mark of high status. Harry didn't give a damn about status, and knowing you'd have a bad day or have a friendship break up, without knowing why - and thus having a chance to prevent or fix it - just seemed like an exercise in masochism to him.

Painful and pointless.

Painful he could deal with. Pointless was worth spitting on.

He'd make his own future.

He glanced around the classroom, from Lavender's enraptured face to Hermione's disgusted one, and forced himself - again - to keep his face neutral.

And to think - if I hadn't ordered those books on Divination over the summer in order to prepare... all I'd know would be Trelawney's obsession.

-

"Hi Harry."

He looked up in surprise from his book, then smiled. "Hey Neville, how have you been?"

The slightly chubby boy blushed, but looked determined. When he glanced around - and if the other boy was trying to be circumspect, he failed miserably - Harry's eyebrows rose. "Neville?"

Apparently satisfied that the common room was empty - understandable, since it was almost midnight - he spoke. "I just-" He stopped. Took a deep breath. Started again. "Are you guys - you, Ron, and Hermione - okay? You really just... seem to not be around a lot."

He blinked, not sure quite what to say to that. "You're... worried about us?"

Neville ducked his head. "You're different. All of you. And even when you're here, you're not here."

"What-"

"It's like you're in your own little spell." Neville interrupted, rushed. Almost babbling. "The three of you - you might be in the common room, but there's this bubble of space. And you're talking about something or studying something and just generally being very involved and studious and making other people not want to interrupt, which is fine, of course, and school is important, but you don't just sit around and laugh like you used to, or play games - except on Sunday - and I'm not trying to say it's bad, of course, and I don't think the others have really noticed as much as I do, but-"

"Neville. Breathe."



"Sorry."

There was a few moments of silence - uncomfortable silence. Then Harry ventured to say, "We're okay. We're just... taking school a lot more seriously."

Neville sent him a look. Harry's eyebrows went back up. He hadn't known the shy boy had it in him. Unfortunately, the other Gryffindor ruined it by immediately ducking his head and hunching his shoulders, as if embarrassed by his own audacity.

"Okay," he admitted. "We're taking it all a lot more seriously. But Ginny died, last year. And we couldn't stop it. And we tried. So now... now we're making sure that if something like that happens again. We win this time."

Neville looked up again, and studied him closely. He held the other boy's brown eyes. Finally, the boy nodded. "Okay, Harry. I won't bother you again, then. Just..."

He trailed off and Harry spoke into the silence, as Neville seemed to grope for words.

"It wasn't a bother," he said.

"Oh. Well, good." Another moment of silence, then Neville shifted his feet. "Um, goodnight Harry."

"Goodnight, Neville."

He watched the other boy turn and head back towards the staircase, then called out as he set foot on the first step.

"Neville?"

The brown haired boy turned back. "Yes?"

He smiled. "Thanks."

Neville smiled back, relief lighting his face. "Anytime." Then he turned and headed up the stairs.

Still sitting in his chair, Harry watched him go.

Huh.

-

One of the most aggravating things about Harry, Hermione decided, staring down at the list before her, was his habit of being frustratingly, intuitively right, even when it seemed like all logical indicators should point to a contrary conclusion. Sometimes, it almost seemed like a magical gift in and of itself.

Well, she reconsidered, scanning the familiar items, he was sort of right, anyway. She'd been right, too: although there did exist items and potions that would convey mental benefits upon the user, they were definitely not common. And certainly weren't the type the school would be supplying every student with.

Even including things of great rarity, she'd still had trouble. Five weeks of research had yielded a page.

Now she set that precious page before her, and looked up into Ron and Harry's expectant faces.

"I broke my list up into two categories. Things - items or potions or such - and permanent magical skills or abilities we could acquire. Which do you want to hear about first?"

Harry leaned forward, eyes intent. "Which are the quickest to get results?"

"Well, since most of the self-done stuff is years of work..."

"Years?"

She sighed. "Yes Ron, years." Oddly enough, Harry seemed more resigned than surprised. She raised her eyebrows at him and he shrugged.

"Like anything else has been easy?"

She conceded the point with a flick of her quill, and returned to her list. "The first thing I ran across is the Wit-Sharpening Potion. It's fourth year level brewing, one of several mental agility potions, most of which use Runespoor eggs. On its own, it seems to speed up your thinking process for a limited amount of time - three to six hours. In conjunction with the Memory potion - you remember, we brewed that toward the end of first year - you can absorb a ridiculously large amount of information very quickly." She glanced down at her notes, more habitual check than any real doubt that she'd forgotten a single iota of all her research these past few weeks. "It's most often used to aid the learning of a new language. The memorization capabilities temporarily conveyed can significantly increase a student's vocabulary in their new language."

"Sounds great." Ron sat, slouched, head propped up on his fisted hand and an interested expression on his face, "So what's the catch?"

"Well..." she said, grimacing. "There are several."

Harry sighed. "Limited use?"

"Among other things." She shrugged. "Try to use it more often than about once every two months, and it'll have no effect. Or poison you, depending on how much residue from the previous use is still in your

brain. Also, it lets you absorb a lot of information very quickly, but like I said: it's best for rote memorization. Not something like spell incantations, which require a more intuitive mastery - how it feels - or something complex like high level warding. Just because you've memorized a complex mathematical equation doesn't mean you understand it, after all, or know where and when to apply it. That... building of connections... just doesn't seem to be something magic can substitute. It goes faster, since you have the information stored in your head ready to access, but you still have to go over everything you've just learned - it's not instantaneous knowledge.

"But it is faster," Harry said.

She nodded.

He looked thoughtful, but across from her, Ron frowned. "Wait a moment. Hermione, you said it's most commonly used to learn a language, right?"

"Yes. It can cut learning times in half - or even a quarter or a sixth - depending on how much native talent you have with language learning, and how well you react to the potion."

"Okay. But - isn't ancient runes a language? Why aren't you using this potion to learn it?"

"Technically, ancient runes is a general category which includes the study of a variety of runic language variations: elder futhark, younger futhark, anglo-saxon Futhroc, gothic runes, and-" she cut herself off under their stares and heaved a sigh. Intellectual curiosity. Surely someday they'll develop it. "Anyway, who says we don't? Apparently, they start in fourth year. Something about safety risks and developing brains and childrens' bodies reacting differently than teenagers and adults." She shrugged. "How else did you think we pick up six different - if overlapping - dead languages in five years of study?"

There was a few moments of silence as they all contemplated the information, then Harry shook his head. "Okay... it's going to take awhile before we know how we want to use the potions, then. What else did you find?"

"There's the Pick-me-up Potion - a sort of mild version of the Pepperup potion - rather like coffee, actually." She bit her lip. "It's not huge, but it might help our nightly study sessions. It's supposed to wake you up a bit; help you focus. And since it's milder than pepperup, there aren't any dosage restrictions on its use."

She looked down at her notes again, sighed, and looked up. "That was pretty much all I could find as far as useful potions go. There are a variety of lesser versions of the wit-sharpening potion available, created before the current version became widely accepted as the best. There's a potion which lets you remember everything you read for the next five hours with perfect clarity - but then you forget it all. That one is banned during tests, by the way. There's a potion which solidifies into a candle once it cools, and when burned it's supposed to make you relaxed and more receptive to the environment - although what exactly "relaxed and receptive" means I couldn't pin down. Honestly, there really isn't much. And that doesn't surprise me. I mean, we're talking about brain chemistry. I don't think even wizards really understand how the brain works. Muggles certainly don't.

"Spells - charms, I mean - were pretty much a flat no-go.

"I did find a few enchanted objects and artifacts that might be what we're looking for. The problem is, most of them were the equivalent of masterworks. Unique. So they're the valued treasure of an old wizarding family, in the ministry's custody, or they're lost to legend. In any case, I don't think we'll be getting our hands on one any time soon."

Harry leaned forward. "If we can't buy or find one of these items, could we make one?"

She wasn't surprised at the question. Stubborn, she noted, seems to be Harry's default setting.

"Mate," Ron spoke up while she was trying to think of a tactful way to reply. Contrary to what some people thought, she wasn't completely oblivious to social skills. She just tended to forget a little bit when she was excited about new things. Or when strangers or new acquaintances wanted to talk about the most boring, trivial things. Did anyone actually care about the weather? Or what someone wore last week? "Even I heard her say 'masterwork.' We're not stupid - and Hermione's a bloody genius - but we're not up to that."

"But polyjuice was pretty advanced-"

"That was following a recipe, Harry. I'm betting the creators of this stuff didn't leave instructions behind, right Hermione?"

She met his eyes. "Right." Then she looked back to their black-haired friend. "Sorry, Harry."

He waved it off. "You did say masterwork. I just wanted..." The sound he made was less a sigh than an exhalation of frustration. "Well, what items did you find? Just in case."

"Well, there's Aredenti's earrings. They were supposed to make the wearer more perceptive - it wasn't clear what that means - but they disappeared sometime in the 1600s. In 1497 Percival Rosier was said to have created a ring which made the bearer both insightful and a skilled reader of people. I'd assume it's in the hands of whoever the latest descendent is. Ian MacCullen had a torc that was supposed to amplify a wizard's "instincts" - there wasn't really any more information on where it currently is, or if the family ever sold or lost it. There was another ring that supposedly made one lucky in their endeavors, but no one is sure who has it now. The owner was murdered in 1326, and the ring disappeared with his murderer.

There's a dagger that's supposed to convey some sort of increased combat ability to the one who holds it - rumored to be confiscated by the ministry sometime in the 1800s."

"You weren't kidding," Ron interrupted when she drew breath to continue. "Lost, in pureblood hands, probably the same, confiscated by the ministry... And nothing that seems to be exactly what we're looking for, anyway. Useful, I reckon, but not what we're looking for."

She consulted her list, then looked back up at them, skipping ahead. "Really, the only thing I've found that seems to do exactly what we want - increase general intelligence - is the lost diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw."

Ron looked glum. "Lost?"

"Almost a thousand years ago."

It was apparently too much for her friend: he made a sound akin to air wheezing out of a deflating tire and flopped backwards, sending cushions tumbling. She leaned around the table to check - there'd been a surprisingly solid thunk sound that might have been his head hitting the floor - and found him lying limply, expression defeated. The situation was a bit depressing, but she had to restrain a slight smile. Ron did dismayed disgust with such enthusiasm.

She straightened back up and turned to look at Harry, wondering how he was taking this, but his eyes were far-off, the look he'd get when he was thinking hard about something.

"Harry?"

His gaze snapped to hers like a snake, striking. She almost flinched.

"What about Gryffindor's Sword?"

She frowned, not tracking his thoughts. "His sword? I didn't find any mention of it increasing the intelligence of the wielder-"

"No," he interrupted. "I mean, do you know if there was anything special about Gryffindor's sword? Was it a lost masterwork too?"

She blinked, taken aback. "I... have no idea."

"It is." Ron's voice brought their attention to him, and he sat up in a rush. "It was enchanted to always strike true, and to gain strength from its fallen foes. And in the hands of a master swordsman - and Gryffindor was, you know, since back then we didn't have obliviate and swords let us discourage muggles without sending an entire district into a tizzy about magic - in a master's hands, it was almost always lethal."

Harry was looking impressed, and she suddenly remembered that Harry had wielded this legendary sword in battle. He'd skipped over the details in his first, rushed explanation of what had happened, because - at the time - the important part had been Ginny, the slaying of the basilisk almost an afterthought. ("The sorting hat gave me Gryffindor's sword; I killed the basilisk with it.") And she hadn't brought the topic up again - she could be oblivious, yes, but you'd have to be an idiot not to realize the whole night had to be painful - and beyond that, she could admit to herself that she hadn't wanted to think about it.

She didn't think either of her friends realized - really realized - how stressful last year had been for her. Ron because he was pureblood, even though he never boasted of it - or, even more to his credit, never even seemed to notice it - and Harry because... Well, Harry just didn't seem to have the normal sort of survival instincts most people came equipped with. Those things that told people to run away when confronted with things like a Dark Lord adults spoke of in whispers even today, or a millennia old monster of legend. But she - she was muggleborn, and almost a year older than the two of them,



and a girl, and she was too smart to think she wasn't a target.

And she'd known - and thinking about it too hard, even now, brought an echo of that icy feeling that'd haunted her last year - known that many in the school didn't like her. Specifically didn't like her, rather than just not liking her blood or background.

In retrospect, she couldn't believe how little the professors had penalized Malfoy and the like's taunting crows. Hadn't they realized how terrifying it was? It wasn't so bad between classes, when the halls were busy, or in the evenings, Ron and Harry's presence a warm comfort as the trooped from place to place, too boisterous and confident and alive to let her worry. But when she'd had to go places alone, returning books to the library, walking the quiet corridors of the school...

It'd been a familiar nightmare by the end of the school year: sneaking through endless hallways, feeling a presence behind her growing with every step.

It hadn't been until after she was petrified that her dream self had started running into the basilisk. But in her dreams there was no mirror, or pool of water, or ghost or lucky, lucky trick of chance, and when she saw those yellow eyes...

Her parents wanted to know what brought her awake, screaming, sometimes. After their reactions to her stories of Quirrel her first year, she hadn't dared to tell them the truth.

So no, she hadn't thought much on the basilisk when she could help it. But for the first time, she found herself curious about how Harry's battle had played out.

Even as she wondered, though, she'd kept part of her attention on Ron, and she broke into his story, impressed. "You know a lot about Gryffindor, Ron."

He blushed, looking slightly embarrassed, but also pleased. And proud. "Weasleys have a tendency towards Gryffindor," he admitted. "It's not absolute - Grandpa was a hufflepuff - but we've been telling bedtime stories about our house's founder for generations."

"Any similar stories about Ravenclaw?" Harry asked.

Ron shook his head. "No, why?"

"It could have come in handy."

The comment was enough to finally give her an idea of what he was thinking. "Harry, you can't imagine we can find it. People have been looking for centuries - it's been lost since practically the founding of the school! A fair amount of researchers have decided it might even have been a myth."

He looked at her steadily, and even before he opened his mouth, she realized that yes, he was deadly serious about this.

"The same thing," he said, soft but implacable, like the first snowflake of a winter blizzard, "was likely once said of the Chamber of Secrets."

Ron looked amazed. "Blimey Harry, you mean - you think it might still be here? At Hogwarts?"

"The Chamber of Secrets is here," he answered, green eyes intent, "hidden. The sword of Gryffindor is here, once hidden in the sorting hat. Why wouldn't Ravenclaw hide her diadem here too? I've never heard anyone mention the Ravenclaw family other than her, maybe she didn't have anyone to leave it too. Hermione called them masterworks - surely Hogwarts was one of the greatest masterworks of all? Why not hide lesser secrets and enchantments inside it?"

Ron glowed with enthusiasm and Harry burned with purpose like a

miniature star, and she opened her mouth to explain why not. To speak of things like logic, and coincidence, all the factors against it being true, the numbered list she could see in her head, scrolling out a multitude of reasons, everything on it from the thousand years people had spent fruitlessly searching to the fact they had no claim on the legacy if they did find it - not the parseltongue connection to Slytherin, nor the house connection to Gryffindor - and they shouldn't waste time and effort on an enterprise doomed to fail - then closed her mouth.

She had a hundred reasons. Good reasons. Logical reasons, Enough reasons to convince an assembly - and one thought that stopped her.

Or rather, a memory of a thought.

...frustratingly, intuitively right, even when it seemed like all logical indicators should point to a contrary conclusion...

They were staring at her mulishly, expressions set, and she knew they were waiting for her to try to shoot them down. And that was the final push she needed, because really, it wouldn't do to seem completely predictable. So she smiled at them instead of frowning, and asked: "Where do we start?"

The smile threatened to turn into a full fledged smirk at their expressions - more gob smacked than merely surprised - and she bent and pulled a fresh notebook from her book bag to hide it. By the time she'd straightened up and looked at them again, she'd managed to rearrange her expression into simple curiosity.

"Uh..." Harry replied, brain still apparently having trouble switching gears. The smirk threatened briefly to reappear, but she beat it down, and he quickly pulled himself together. "Well, could you see what you can find out about it - and Ravenclaw in general - in the library? And Ron - maybe you could write your parents? Or brothers? They might

know something about Ravenclaw like they do about Gryffindor. The two were friends, after all."

"What are you going to be doing?" Ron beat her to the question.

Harry smiled. "I'm going to talk to the one person still around who remembers the founders personally."

It took her a moment.

"Can you?" she asked disbelievingly.

The smile turned into a grin. "I have a standing invitation."

Ron looked between the two of them. "Uh, mates?"

"He's going to see the same thing that gave him Gryffindor's sword," she replied for Harry, still amazed, because this was a tack she would never, ever, have thought of.

"He's going to talk to the Sorting Hat."

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Chapter End

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Notes: I tried to respond to all of your reviews. Although some of you know that my responses were very... Ahem. . Late. But I read every one, and appreciated every one. And if I somehow managed to miss you in my PM responses, I want to thank you here.

- Wit-Sharpening + Memory Potions

How else do we explain people picking up 22 to 200 languages over

the course of their life? Especially since it's not mentioned as a magical talent a la parseltongue.

- Regarding Ancient Runes:

I had to make a choice this chapter. Ancient Runes has alllll sorts of incredibly fun possibilities. Runic magic as a conduit for blood magic! Or ritual magic! Or soul magic! Warding magic! Enchantments! In short, it lets the imagination run wild. Especially since actual information about the class is really scarce in the books. All sorts of extremely creative fanfiction writers have come up with their own twist on ancient runes; but when I went into canon research for it, I found that all ancient runes really seems to be is the study of ancient languages. That's it. Disappointing, but true. Which led to my decision.

In a way, I'm sort of treating this story as a writing exercise, wherein everything about the Harry Potter universe is supposed to stay the same until the specified divergence point - Ginny's death - and afterwards changes that echo throughout the story should be capable of tracing back to that divergence. Some of the repercussions happen offstage, since the Trio don't experience them, and some happen on stage directly for your viewing pleasure. But it also means that if I want to stay true to that - and I do, though it will probably happen with only varied levels of success - then ancient runes has to remain simply a language course.

- Divination:

Because Divination - as opposed to prophecy - as it is presented in the Harry Potter universe is basically completely useless, and I have a hard time believing something completely without point would be a major elective in the primary educational institution of the magical UK.

Plus, I never saw anything in the books which contradicts the idea

that there might be more to divination than Trelawney's - admitted - obsession with being a great seer. Or the centaur's habits of staring at the sky and making vague remarks.

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Next Chapter:

Sometimes, he'd look up from the current assignment and catch McGonagall watching him with an indecipherable expression. (Sometimes, he even thought that expression might be regret.) But if he met her eyes she'd turn away, expressionless, the utter blankness a message in itself. The first time it happened, he'd felt his heart twist, despite his anger. Then, for awhile, he'd only felt anger. Now, he could almost feel indifferent to it all. Not to her - he didn't know how long it would be, before he could look at her and not feel that bite of betrayal - but to her disappointment?

Repeated exposure had worn away the shame he had felt initially. There was only so long that unfair disapproval - even from someone you highly respected - could sting.

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CHP09